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## Gender and Sexuality-Based Bullying: Student Experiences and Educator Responses

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*The University of Western Ontario*

Graduate Program in Sociology

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree in Doctor of Philosophy

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## Abstract

Drawing on qualitative interview data, this dissertation critically examines the issue of gender and sexuality-based bullying (GSB) in the context of Ontario schools. GSB is explained through a theoretical perspective that situates bullying as a mechanism employed by students as they navigate gendered and heteronormative school status structures. Because the status-based structures are so entrenched in educational contexts, a resilience perspective is also adopted to determine best next-steps for mitigating the negative effects of GSB. Further, resilience in this case is viewed through a critical sociological lens that requires the consideration of broader social forces, rather than reducing resilience to an individual-level construct.

The key goals of this project are to determine how academically resilient students, or those who are currently enrolled in post-secondary contexts have experienced GSB. In addition, this research seeks to understand how they managed their experiences and what they think schools could do to better help students develop resilience in the face of this type of behavior.

As a secondary component of this project, student interview data is supplemented with qualitative interviews with educators from the middle-school context to determine what their experiences with GSB involve, how they deal with the issue, and what they think of the students suggestions given the need to evaluate these ideas in the context of everyday school environments and the practical realities of classrooms.

This analysis suggests that GSB is experienced in a variety of ways, and educators and schools are seen as key players in efforts to address GSB, and in helping students to develop resilience and positive self-identities. Educators were also found to be receptive to student suggestions and efforts to prevent and target any forms of bullying that occur. What was particularly noteworthy were the educator perceptions that middle schools would not be contexts that would likely see much GSB, despite the gendered and heteronormative messaging that students reported experiencing even during those years. Key theoretical and policy implications are also presented to highlight the central need to address and challenge

the gendered and heteronormative status evaluations that appear to be facilitated in school contexts.

## Keywords

Bullying, gender, sexuality, social status, heteronormativity, Ontario, schools, resilience.

## Summary for Lay Audience

Bullying is seen as an increasingly important social issue that needs to be addressed. What is suggested here is that academics and educators should also try to focus on addressing particular types of bullying, such as bullying that is targeted against those who identify or are perceived to be non-heterosexual, or do not fit with dominant gender expectations and stereotypes. This study summarizes the results of interviews conducted with those students who have experienced this particular form of bullying and is an attempt to understand what can be done by schools to help other students deal with similar experiences, so they are not as impacted by the negative effects of this form of bullying.

In addition to the student experiences, educators employed in middle school contexts were also interviewed to see what they understand about this sub-form of bullying, how they deal with it, and what they think about the student suggestions for school-based prevention and intervention initiatives. This second step of the research process was an attempt to try to understand the student suggestions in light of what educators need to deal with in an everyday school context, and the other factors that educators may need to balance when looking to enhance intervention and diversity initiatives in schools.

What this study found was that schools and educators are key in attempts to address this form of bullying, and that this is an issue that should not just be understood from an individual level. There are broader forces at play that influence student engagement with this type of behaviour, and how willing and able educators are to intervene to the fullest extent to address this issue. Alongside the findings of this study, implications for researchers and educators are presented to make suggestions for the best next steps in understanding and dealing with this form of bullying.

## Acknowledgments

I would first like to thank my supervisor Dr. Wolfgang Lehmann for his support throughout my journey through graduate school. From my MA paper to this dissertation (and everything else that has been read along the way), the support and guidance that has been provided has been fundamental to my success. I am incredibly grateful for the mentorship, patience, and support that you have provided over the past years.

I would also like to thank Dr. Tracey Adams for providing a secondary perspective on this project. Your insights enabled me to step back and clear my head when I needed to, and your feedback has been invaluable in terms of shaping what this dissertation has become. To have provided that level of support, in conjunction with everything else that you have been involved in over the last few years, is inspiring.

I must also thank the members of my defense committee, Dr. Andrea Willson, Dr. Sean Waite, Dr. Wayne Martino, and Dr. Kristopher Wells. Not just have you served on my committee, you have shaped my learning and knowledge in various direct and indirect ways that extend beyond the context of the current research project. Thank you for your input, insights, and your time, it is greatly appreciated.

I would also be remiss if I did not acknowledge the support that I received through Ontario Graduate Scholarship funding. I applaud your efforts to support graduate level research and the next generation of scholars and am thankful that I was one of the supported students.

To those others who have helped me along the way, your support has been invaluable. To list everyone who has played a role in this dissertation, in the Western community and further afield, would certainly affect my page limit, so I will leave it as a simple ‘thank you’, and I hope I can return the favour to each of you in one way or another.

Finally, this entire journey would not have been possible without the unwavering and undeniable support of my family. There really are no words to convey how much I appreciate everything that you have done for me – and you know how wordy I can be!

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## Chapter 1

### 1 Introduction

The notion of bullying is likely to conjure up a variety of mental images or representations of different behaviours, for different people. Such representations may be based on media depictions of bullying in television shows and movies, or news reports about this problematic behaviour. For others, conceptualizations may be based on bullying situations that they themselves have been exposed to. Regardless of what comes to mind, the notion of bullying is more than likely to be understood as a problem and as something that should be addressed.

Research efforts have been put into trying to understand bullying since the 1970s when Dan Olweus first began to systematically investigate this behaviour (Olweus, 1993). Prior to this, the concept of ‘mobbing’ was used to describe similar behaviours when perpetrated by groups (Olweus, 2010). Since this early inception, the notion of bullying has made its way into the public lexicon and become a widely discussed topic within educational institutions, media sources, and everyday conversations. Such broad-based discussion has not only helped to bring an awareness that showcases the extent of the issue but has also helped to highlight the harmful effects that can result from this behaviour.

In a study published by The Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, percentages of students who reported experiencing bullying at school showed a decrease from 2003 to 2017, thus suggesting that there has been progress in attempts to address this form of behaviour and reduce the extent of bullying in schools (Boak, Hamilton, Adlaf, Henderson & Mann, 2018). Nonetheless, percentages still suggest that in the year the survey was conducted, one-in-five 7<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> graders (or roughly 197, 400 students) had experienced bullying in school that year, and 6.7% of surveyed students reported that this bullying occurred on a daily or weekly basis (Boak et al., 2018). As outlined in Ontario’s *Accepting Schools Act* (2012), this problematic behaviour is something that has been recognized as a potential impediment to educational success, further cementing bullying

as something that needs to be addressed, not just for the benefit of those who are directly targeted, but for the broader student population as well.

While much academic and policy attention has been given to the different behaviours that can be categorized as bullying (i.e. verbal, physical, social isolation etc.), further sub-categorizations can highlight the ways that bullying differentially impacts certain individuals depending on who is a target of this behaviour and why. This sub-focus allows for a consideration of how effects differ when someone is targeted for identity-based factors, and thus targeted based on who they are. For example, one can consider sexual and gender minority (SGM) individuals as targets of a specific form of this identity-based bullying, referred to here as gender and sexuality-based bullying (GSB). Because this type of bullying is based on identity characteristics, it is conceivably different from other instances of bullying where people are attacked for less personal reasons. Given such differences, researchers and educators should seek to consider GSB separately from more generic notions of bullying in order to understand how it may differ in terms of causes or effects, thus potentially requiring alternate intervention methods than more generic forms.

This doctoral study intends to contribute to the existing literature on bullying, and in particular GSB, within the Ontario context. Furthermore, the goal is to highlight improvements that can be made to existing initiatives that prevent this behaviour from occurring or those that deal with the effects. Such improvements, as argued here, must ultimately consider the heteronormative context of educational institutions as this can be a factor that contributes to the persistence of GSB, but is also harmful to students independently of bullying. While anti-bullying initiatives can help to prevent GSB, challenging heteronormative contexts is also likely to help foster resilience in SGM students to better enable them to deal with or overcome some of the negative effects associated with being a target of this behaviour. Insofar as anti-bullying measures arguably remain limited in their ability to address this issue, efforts to build resilience may be a more immediate solution that could be undertaken alongside anti-bullying initiatives geared more towards long-term change.

## 1.1 Thesis Overview

In order to highlight the value of this research project, a literature review is presented to define the relatively complex issue of bullying, along with outlining GSB as a sub-type of this behaviour. Research that highlights the negative effects associated with bullying is also presented to again reinforce the need to take this issue seriously, and to reiterate the contribution of an intersectional focus that takes account of differences rooted in experiencing GSB in particular.

As bullying is not a new issue and efforts have been put forward throughout Ontario schools to address this, the second chapter presents a review of some of the currently undertaken educational initiatives that attempt to address the problem. The intent behind this is to help establish a baseline understanding of the current approaches that Ontario employs to deal with bullying, GSB, and for fostering diversity in school environments. Strengths and weaknesses of the existing approaches can be assessed based on the existing literature and the logical gaps that may emerge from implementation issues. Such critiques are presented in this second chapter and can be further substantiated through the theoretical explanation of the occurrence of GSB and in relation to the results of the current study.

The third chapter uses a combination of theoretical perspectives to put forward the argument that despite the best efforts of educators, occurrences of bullying are likely to continue without larger structural changes being made. In order to outline this understanding, a status-based theoretical understanding of schools is adopted. This perspective sees schools as institutions that facilitate and encourage status-competition amongst students, in which bullying can then be understood as a mechanism of status-differentiation and reinforcement. In addition, understanding schools as institutions that reinforce binary notions of gender and heteronormative expectations for students also demonstrates how GSB, as a particular form of bullying, is further structured by larger social forces that need to be addressed in order to ultimately deal with the issue in a more complete manner. As such, it is important to not become complacent based on overall signs and assumptions of progress as groups of individuals (such as SGM youth) may still be particularly vulnerable to experiencing bullying, insofar as the broader structural



forces remain unchallenged and unchanged. Based on this, anti-bullying efforts that fail to address the heteronormative environment and how this influences the status-evaluation of students are likely to have an upper limit to their success at eliminating the problem. Nonetheless, once the problem is theoretically outlined, more effective solutions can then be sought.

Tying in the theoretical perspective of resilience becomes a way to idealize the next best steps for dealing with the issue in the short-term, or in the absence of broader changes to school status-systems. This chapter also explains that a critical and sociological approach to resilience is adopted, and what this means for understanding this concept in the face of normative social expectations. In doing so, this dissertation is also able to advocate for a future direction that does not continue to individualize the problem, nor the solution. Instead, adopting a broader and more sociology-informed notion of resilience, allows this dissertation to demonstrate the need to again account for the same heteronormative and gendered structural school context that both facilitates GSB and inhibits the resilience of SGM individuals. To summarize and reiterate the contribution that this research makes to the existing literature, the overarching argument is also presented alongside the main research questions at the conclusion of this third chapter.

In the fourth chapter, the methodological approach to the current research project has been outlined. A discussion of key ethical considerations and a researcher reflexivity statement further explain the process and impetus for engaging in this project.

The results sections that follow the methods section are divided based on the two sample groups that were interviewed for this project. Results from the student-based interviews are presented first. They outline what student experiences with GSB were like and how students also felt particularly vulnerable given the oppressive school cultures that reinforced heteronormative understandings of sexuality and the traditional and restrictive gender binary. Given that a goal of this research is to highlight further improvements that can be made to current initiatives, student suggestions for what would have helped them better navigate school and bullying experiences are also presented. The educator results chapter follows with an explanation of how the second set of participants understand

GSB and their perspective on the occurrence of such behaviours in the middle school contexts where they work. Educator responses to the student suggestions are provided to also illuminate their perspectives on the suggestions and whether they foresee any obstacles to making further changes to protect or support SGM students. While such obstacles are not representative of all school contexts (given the size of the educator sample group), they nonetheless help to illuminate everyday realities or challenges that must be understood when looking at the way that schools and educators are made responsible for dealing with bullying, GSB, and fostering a safe and accepting environment for all students.

Following the two results sections, a discussion chapter provides a broader critique of both sets of findings and situates this within the existing literature and initiatives that have been outlined in the earlier chapters. This section reinforces the value and necessity of dismantling the restrictive heteronormative educational context to not only address the issue of GSB, but also to allow for education to become a mechanism through which resilience can be fostered. Here, the complexity of making such changes within different school contexts is also examined further with a particular focus on looking at the middle school grades as a time and place where the utility of such change seems to be greatest, but also as a site subject to certain tensions that may inhibit the extent to which such change is viewed as necessary or successfully implemented. Overall the discussion will showcase how progress has been made to address the issues of bullying, GSB, and the lack of gender and sexual diversity which restricts and polices students. At the same time, this section will also articulate the argument that future work is needed to enhance student resilience alongside the focus on anti-bullying initiatives, given the likelihood that students will continue to face GSB in the coming years despite the progress that has been made and the initiatives that have been put in place. Finally, the limitations of the current project will be outlined but ultimately used to highlight the ideal next steps for future research that can inform additional educational changes. Overall, this project is a contributing step in the efforts to investigate and address this specific form of bullying that showcases a valuable pathway to alleviate or mitigate some of the negative effects that impact upon students who are exposed to and targeted by GSB.

## Chapter 2

### 2 Literature Review – Understanding the Issue

#### 2.1 Don't Be a Bully – Defining the Behaviour

Although Arora (1996) argues for the essentiality of a clear definition of bullying for both understanding incidents as well as efforts aimed at prevention and intervention, there is no one universally agreed upon definition of bullying. As will be shown here, attempts have been made to articulate definitions in the realm of academic research, legislation, and educational policy. Any differences between those contexts are further complicated by the potential for discrepancies in media and public uses of the term.

##### 2.1.1 Academic Definitions of Bullying

As outlined by Olweus (1993), one of the first academics to study this issue, bullying is understood as occurring when a student “...*is exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more other students*” (italics in original, p. 9). The final component that Olweus (1993) requires for a situation to be considered as a form of bullying is an imbalance of power between the instigator(s) and the recipient(s) in that the two fighting parties cannot be considered the same in terms of physical or psychological strength. Thus, an asymmetrical power relationship is required before the term bullying can be applied accurately to describe a situation and separates this from other negative interactions. The negative actions referenced in the above definition can include the attempted or actual intentional infliction of injury or discomfort upon another which can range from verbal teasing, taunting, and threatening, to more physical actions such as pushing or pinching another individual (Olweus, 1993). This broad range of aggressive behaviours continues to be given in the literature as examples of bullying behaviour, alongside other non-physical forms such as verbal or emotional abuse, and exclusion, which involves ignoring individuals/groups or leaving them out on purpose (Wang, Iannotti & Luk, 2012). Other expansions of the notion of bullying include the indirect or relational bullying that involves altering the target's relationships with their peers (Land, 2003).

While there appears to be much consistency amongst more recent conceptualizations with this original framework, not all components identified by Olweus (1993) are universally accepted (Rigby, Smith & Pepler, 2004; Smith & Brain, 2000). For example, Arora (1996) questions the necessity of repetition, asserting that even a single physical act or threat can have longitudinal or long-term effects on the targeted individual in the form of emotional strain caused by that singular event, and also as a result of the perceived threat of potential future acts. The author argues instead that a situation can be classified as bullying insofar as consideration is given to the potential long-term effect(s) on the victim, in lieu of the actual repetition of acts. While this distinction has implications for the statistical reporting of bullying, and further muddies the waters when it comes to creating a singular definition, it is useful in showcasing how such negative interactions can have lasting consequences and that the fear of being further targeted is a perceptual element of bullying that may not be factored in when classification relies on the actual reoccurrence of behaviour.

### 2.1.2 Legislative Definitions of Bullying

Other definitions of bullying have been constructed for the specific purposes of identifying and dealing with this behaviour, as opposed to the deeper and more theoretical understanding that is sought by academics. When it comes to understanding how bullying is framed in contexts outside academia, it is beneficial to start with the legislative framing of bullying as this conceptualization trickles down to other institutional contexts and uses.

While awareness campaigns and information provided at the federal level about bullying (for example see RCMP, 2019 and Government of Canada, 2016) provide some further definitions of this behaviour, there are no specific provisions within the federal *Criminal Code* that legislate against and criminalize bullying. This omission is understandable when one considers the vast range of behaviours and differing levels of severity that the term has been used to describe. Specific behaviours that would fall under the idea of bullying, should they be serious enough to constitute a criminal offence, can be prosecuted under various legislative codes such as criminal harassment, uttering threats,

and intimidation, among others (RCMP, 2019), instead of the umbrella notion of bullying.

From a criminal perspective, changes to the *Criminal Code of Canada* in 2014 with the passage of Bill C-13 is one of the first federal level initiatives that can be said to target cyberbullying behaviours. Specifically, Bill C-13 was implemented to criminalize the non-consensual distribution of intimate images (Paré & Collins, 2016), and to also extend previous sections that already prohibited indecent, harassing and false phone calls and messages to include a prohibition of similar behaviours through the form of online communication (Coburn, Connolly & Roesch, 2015). While this legislation may have been intended to criminalize certain behaviours associated with cyberbullying and was certainly labelled as ‘cyberbullying legislation’ within the media and public discourse, the Act itself is cited as the *Protecting Canadians from Online Crime Act* and contains no references to either the terms cyberbullying or bullying. While the non-consensual sharing of intimate images, which was an issue in a few notable and highly publicized cyberbullying cases in the years prior to the passing of the legislation (for instance in the cases of Amanda Todd and Rehtaeh Parsons), was likely the reason for this misnomer, it should also be noted that this behaviour would constitute a minority or small proportion of cyberbullying cases (Coburn et al., 2015). Thus, while some specific behaviours that could fall under the definition of bullying may be prosecuted through this legislation, Bill C-13 should not be considered as a wholly encompassing attempt to legislate the issue of bullying.

As federal Canadian legislation that addresses bullying is therefore lacking or still under development, the focus when it comes to legislative understandings of bullying continue to be at the provincial level (Paré & Collins, 2016). This is likely due to the relegation of education and health issues to provincial mandates, as bullying is something that has traditionally been dealt with through educational contexts and has become more prominent within the health sphere as the negative health effects associated with this behaviour have become more well known.

As outlined by Paré & Collins (2016), the provincial legislation tends to focus on educational reforms and changes within three main areas: safe school policies that target violence more generally and encompass the notion of bullying; equity and diversity policies; and beginning around 2012, focused anti-bullying policies. Without an overarching federal approach or legislated definition of bullying though, the provinces are free to adopt their own definitions which may vary across the country (Paré & Collins, 2016). Because this provincial definition then becomes the most macro level conceptualization that exists within an official context, the provincial legislation is a key consideration for principals, teachers and other personnel in each of the provinces who are tasked with identifying and responding to such negative behaviours in the classroom environment.

Within Ontario, bullying has been defined by the Ministry of Education as:

...aggressive and typically repeated behaviour by a pupil where,

(a) the behaviour is intended by the pupil to have the effect of, or the pupil ought to know that the behaviour would be likely to have the effect of,

(i) causing harm, fear or distress to another individual, including physical, psychological, social or academic harm, harm to the individual's reputation or harm to the individual's property, or

(ii) creating a negative environment at a school for another individual, and

(b) the behaviour occurs in a context where there is a real or perceived power imbalance between the pupil and the individual based on factors such as size, strength, age, intelligence, peer group power, economic status, social status, religion, ethnic origin, sexual orientation, family circumstances, gender, gender identity, gender expression, race, disability or the receipt of special education. (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2018b, p. 5)

Aggressive behaviour, according to the Ministry, means that bullying can be direct or indirect, and can manifest itself in not only physical, but also verbal and social forms (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2018b). In comparing this definition to those key components presented in the academic literature, the element of repetition is present, although the notion of 'typically' implies that it is not essential in order for behaviours to be classified as bullying under this definition. Intention is also included, but there is a

broader expectation that the onus is on the perpetrator of the bullying to be aware of the potential negative effects that *might* result. A variety of potential harms is included in the definition along with a consideration of the school environment, which can suggest the need to consider indirect or latent effects that might also result from bullying behaviour. Power imbalances have also been included in the definition with the explicit inclusion of factors that can be directly linked with discrimination and rights issues (Paré & Collins, 2016). Overall, Ontario's definition of bullying provided by the Ministry of Education, closely aligns with the definitions that have been outlined throughout the academic literature.

### 2.1.3 Public Notions of Bullying

Despite efforts by academics and legislators to create a clear and cohesive definition of bullying, the term remains variable as it is subject to differential interpretation and application in everyday public use. This has implications for research and intervention. As Walton (2005) has suggested, newspaper articles that attempt to highlight the significance of the issue may utilize the term bullying in a manner that deviates from other uses, yet reporters inherently presume that the use of the term bullying implies a commonly understood and conceptually unproblematic phenomenon. With various media definitions being added to the mix, and room for further differentiation by the public and the student population who are likely to adopt different understandings of this behaviour (Arora; 1996; Land, 2003), it is important to consider the impossible task of reaching consensus and the creation of a singular definition that spans different realms and contextual uses. This variability, and potential for differential understandings, should be a key consideration of any study that attempts to investigate bullying from the perspective of non-academics and non-educators who would not otherwise be familiar with access to the accepted academic and legislative understandings of the term.

With this in mind, the following study adopts the perspective that bullying, while well defined in certain regards, retains a level of ambiguity that one must be cognizant of as it is a behaviour that is subject to interpretation by researchers, educators, parents and students themselves. While the provincial and academic notions of bullying are therefore useful for making reflective evaluations, they are not considered useful for determining

inclusion or exclusion criteria in this study and participants (as will be discussed further in the methods section) were left to discuss the behaviours that they felt fit with the concept of bullying.

Furthermore, as this project is an attempt to evaluate and improve upon the existing efforts to address bullying and the contexts that sustain this behaviour, adopting a singular working definition of bullying was not seen as essential in order to conduct research that may end up being critical of the definitions that already exist. What was considered important, was moving beyond a generic notion of bullying and trying to gain a better understanding of the behaviours that target one's gender or sexuality specifically.

## 2.2 Considering GSB – Identity-Based Bullying

According to Brinkman (2016), instead of focusing on a decontextualized understanding of bullying, attention needs to be paid to the impact of one's social identity. Defining identity-based bullying as "...any form of bullying related to the characteristics considered unique to a child's actual or perceived social identity" (p. 3), Brinkman (2016) highlights that this particular sub-category of bullying focuses on identity variables, even if such variables are not an accurate representation of that child's identity. As an example, this means that someone could be subject to identity-based bullying based on the perception that the individual is not heterosexual, even though the individual may not identify as such. Along with sexual orientation, Brinkman (2016) includes gender identity, ethnicity, nationality, religion, social class, and ability or disability as other characteristics that underlie identity-based bullying. The same identity markers are contained in the Ontario Ministry of Education's definition of bullying that was previously outlined, however there are no separate definitions or distinctions that demarcate identity-based bullying as something that should be understood or dealt with in a manner that differs from more generic approaches to bullying. While each of the identity markers is important to consider and attempt to understand in their own right, the focus of this study is on the bullying that targets individuals based on factors associated with gender and/or sexuality.



Some may question the grouping of gender and sexual orientation-based bullying. Indeed, arguments can be made for their distinctiveness. Given that norms of gender conformity are key in understanding both the nature and sustainment of heteronormativity though (Toomey, McGuire, & Russell, 2012), it can also be argued that it is acceptable to group them in the current investigation. Heteronormativity, short for “normative sexuality” (Peter & Taylor, 2013, p. 75), is used to refer to the ways that social institutions work to reinforce the gender, sex, and sexual binaries which subsequently supports the privileging of certain (heterosexual and gender conforming) individuals over others who deviate from those norms. Such privileging and negative evaluations of deviance can also be understood through the framework of Judith Butler’s (1990) heterosexual matrix.

Because those who deviate are positioned as “other” they can then be stigmatized for not adhering to the mainstream notions of sexuality and/or masculinity/femininity (Peter & Taylor, 2013). Thus, the stigmatization and “...the experience of insult (not to mention physical violence) is one of the most widely shared elements of [homosexual] existence...it is a reality experienced by almost everyone” (Eribon, 2004, p. 18). Furthermore, it is the commonality of this positioning and stigmatization as “other” that allows for the consideration of gender non-conforming and sexual minority populations together. Therefore, because bullying or insult can be based on one’s real or perceived sexual orientation (often assumed based on one’s gender performativity), the distinction between groups was not considered essential here, although it may be considered fruitful in other projects. Studying elements of gender and sexuality together has elsewhere been adopted and advocated for by academics such as Elizabeth Meyer (2008, 2014) and Emma Renold (2002). Based on this logic, the term GSB is used throughout the research to represent the identity-based bullying that occurs and targets aspects of gender and/or sexuality.

## 2.3 Sticks, Stones and Names Can Hurt – Negative Consequences of Bullying

As Espelage, Hong and Mebane (2016) assert, bullying was once considered to be a normative aspect of child development, and although a certain amount of conflict

between peers is still considered normal and an essential part of the developmental process, experiencing bullying can pose serious mental and physical health risks. An extensive body of literature exists that documents the reasons why bullying should be considered problematic. Since the goal of this project is not to document the negative effects which are widely supported elsewhere in the literature, an exhaustive examination of the consequences is not presented. This omission can be further justified through Hawker and Boulton's (2000) argument outlined in the conclusion of their meta-analysis of twenty years' worth of peer victimization research. In this work, the authors explain that more research into the types of distress that individuals experience is not needed. Instead, what is most necessary are studies that investigate interventions that can be used to reduce victim distress. It is this orientation towards continued progress that supports the following smaller-scale review of the key negative effects of bullying. Nonetheless, a brief summary of key internalizing, externalizing, and school related consequences that are associated with general forms of bullying is presented here to substantiate the significance of bullying consequences. Following this, additional research will illustrate how the situation is arguably more dire for SGM individuals.

### 2.3.1 Negative Consequences – Internalizing Problems

Research has documented various internalizing problems that are associated with bullying. Internalizing problems refer to harms to the self that include signs of psychological distress (Arseneault, Bowes, and Shakoor, 2010) or other “inhibited, anxious or highly withdrawn behaviours” (Schwartz, McFadyen-Ketchum, Dodge, Pettit, and Bates, 1999, p. 88). For example, depression and general and social anxiety are consequences associated with experiences of bullying or peer victimization (which is a term that often encompasses, or is used synonymously with, bullying) (Espelage et al., 2016; Hawker & Boulton, 2000; McMahon, Reulbach, Keeley, Perry & Arensman, 2010). Bullying has also been found to undermine one's sense of self (Hawker & Boulton, 2000) and has negative impacts on one's self-esteem (Boulton & Smith, 1994; Delfabbro et al., 2006; Kaltiala-Heino, Rimpela, Rantanen, Rimpela, 2000; McMahon, et al., 2010). Even when acts of bullying cease, internalized effects can be lasting and remain long after the victim is exposed. Indeed, concern over the long-term

psychological symptoms associated with experiencing bullying (Sesar, Barisic, Pandza and Dodja, 2006; Wolke, Copeland, Angold & Costello, 2013) and other negative effects such as alienation, loneliness, and exclusion among others (Adams & Lawrence, 2011) have been documented in the bullying literature.

Experiencing bullying has been found to be associated with self-harming or self-injurious behaviours (Barker, Arseneault, Brendgen, Fontaine, and Maughan, 2008; Fisher et al., 2012; Lereya et al., 2013; McMahon, et al., 2010) and at the extreme end of self-harm, bullying has been associated with suicidal ideation and behaviour (Delfabbro et al., 2006; Kowalski & Limber, 2013).

While researchers may raise questions about the order of causality in terms of internalizing factors and may suggest that such negative behaviours may be a cause of being targeted rather than an effect, this question of temporal order was specifically considered in a meta-analysis of longitudinal studies that focus on peer victimization and internalizing problems (Reijntjes et al., 2011). Upon investigation, the authors found a bi-directional relationship between factors, rather than a uni-directional pattern. Given this bi-directionality and the overwhelming amount of research that has found a correlation between bullying and such internalizing problems, there is sufficient weight to support the need to intervene and prevent bullying from occurring despite outstanding questions of causality.

### 2.3.2 Negative Consequences – Externalizing Problems

In contrast to internalized issues, externalizing problems are those behaviours that are consequences of dealing with bullying that are more harmful or problematic for others. Included in this category is violent behaviour, increased likelihood of carrying a weapon, and a greater likelihood of bullying other individuals (Arseneault et al., 2010), although other researchers focus more on issues such as aggression, truancy and delinquency within their conceptualization of externalizing problems (Reijntjes et al., 2011). Of particular note in this category of effects is the idea that experiencing bullying may lead some individuals to bully others as a form of negative externalizing behaviour. This creates a category of individuals, commonly referred to in the bullying literature as bully-

victims, who may suffer negative effects associated with experiencing bullying but may also experience the negative consequences associated with perpetrating bullying (see for example Yang & Salmivalli, 2013).

While again the purpose here is not to detail all of the negative consequences that such individuals may face, it is sufficient to explain that this group of bully-victims is likely to face the most complex array of consequences. Indeed, as research has explained:

The finding that students who reported both bullying and victimization showed the least optimal psychosocial functioning is of particular interest. Those youth apparently represent a particularly high-risk group, characterized by higher rates of problem behaviour and depressive symptoms, lower self-control and social competence, and poorer school functioning. They are involved in a more deviant peer group and might be less able to form positive friendships with peers; if so, they might be at greater risk for antisocial behaviour into adulthood as well. (Haynie et al., 2001, p. 44)

Thus, engagement in bullying may itself be an externalizing consequence associated with being a target of such behaviour.

Bully-victims not only highlight the potential for further diversity in the consequences of bullying, but also the need to consider the complexity involved in dealing with students who engage in bullying behaviour. In some cases, intervention attempts must therefore account for the differential reasons for bullying, for example when such behaviour might be slightly more defensive in nature as opposed to that which is independent of victimization and intentionally predatory. This means that research and intervention techniques that treat bullies as a homogeneous group may not be as effective as intended due to an oversimplification of the issue. For instance, zero-tolerance policies in schools would indeed punish the bullying behaviour, but would not take into account the unique circumstances of bully-victims who may need a different intervention method that respects their dual experience of bully and victim whereby bullying may better be understood as an externalizing behaviour associated with their own victimization.

### 2.3.3 Negative Consequences – School Related Problems

The idea that bullying may affect one's ability to succeed academically is another effect that should be considered and furthers support for anti-bullying intervention. A small but significant negative relationship between experiencing bullying and academic achievement has been found by Nakamoto and Schwartz (2010) in their meta-analytic review that attempted to reach a more defined consensus on this relationship.

Furthermore, in a cross-sectional study of students from a large urban public-school system in the United States, researchers found that children experiencing academic struggles were more likely to be victims or bully-victims and these children also held feelings of not belonging at school (Glew et al., 2005).

Not belonging at school is important to consider as it may have implications for how engaged students are and how willing they are to continue on in their schooling, beyond high school and into post-secondary contexts. Such school transitions may also be threatened by poor attendance records, as research indicates that absenteeism is an issue for those who experience such victimization over time (Smith, Talamelli, Cowie, Naylor, and Chauhan, 2004). Although literature situated within the Canadian context is lacking regarding the association between experiencing bullying and early school leaving, logically it remains plausible that bullying might be a factor in a student's decision not to continue to higher levels of educational achievement in the form of post-secondary school. This issue has been investigated in other countries (Beilmann, 2016; Townsend, Flisher, Chikobvu, Lombard, & King, 2008) and highlights a need for concern.

### 2.3.4 Negative Consequences – Considering All Harmed Parties

Up to this point, the focus has been on explaining the effects of bullying on targets, or bully-victims. Bystanders as well constitute another group of individuals who may experience negative consequences of being indirectly exposed to bullying. While much of the research on bystanders focuses on encouraging bystander intervention, understanding why this may or may not occur, or considering the supportive roles that bystanders play, more is needed to investigate the negative effects of witnessing bullying (Rivara & Le Menestrel, 2016). There is some research that suggests bystanders may

experience negative mental health effects (Rivers, Poteat, Noret & Ashurst, 2009) related to witnessing the bullying of others. In some cases, it is suggested that the negative stress of witnessing bullying may spur some individuals to intervene and become active bystanders who attempt to stop bullying from occurring (Lambe, Hudson, Craig & Pepler, 2017). Assuming bystanders are not encouraged to act and instead have to bear witness to this behaviour, the negative consequences of bullying can be more widespread when the effects on all parties are considered. Such a connection reinforces the idea that the effects of bullying are significant and may in fact be even more widespread than they first appear.

## 2.4 Greater Exposure and Increased Harms – Negative Consequences of GSB

While the research presented has highlighted the negative effects of bullying and has substantiated the need for interventions that attempt to prevent or address this issue, the research that follows highlights the need to consider GSB as a unique sub-type. Separate consideration is key given the escalated consequences that impact targets of this form of bullying, not to mention the more frequent exposure to bullying that sexual minority and gender non-conforming students face. Such increased frequency is well documented in the literature (Cénat, Blais, Hébert, Lavoie and Guerrier, 2015; Robinson & Espelage, 2011; Swearer, Turner, and Givens, 2008; Williams, Connolly, Pepler, and Craig, 2003; 2005).

Aside from facing greater exposure to bullying, research suggests that those who experience bias-based harassment tend to face worse mental health outcomes than those youth who face harassment not based on such biases (Russell, Sinclair, Poteat and Koenig, 2012). Looking at those targeted for their gender/sexual identity markers, worse mental health outcomes were found for students who had self-labelled at a younger age, were “out” amongst their peers, or were more identifiable as a sexual minority or presented as gender atypical (Pilkington & D’Augelli, 1995).

At the more extreme end of mental health consequences, research has found that sexual minority youth reported a higher prevalence of depressive symptoms and suicidality

when compared to their heterosexual peers (Burton, Marshal, Chisolm, Sucato, & Friedman, 2013). This was partially explained by the higher levels of sexual minority victimization. Additionally, for those who do reach the stage of contemplating suicide, the situation becomes even more dire. Rivers (2001a as cited in Varjas et al., 2008) found that 53 percent of the gay, lesbian, and bisexual participants in his study had contemplated suicide given their experiences with bullying. Of those who had contemplated suicide, 40 percent had attempted suicide at least once, and 75 percent of those who attempted did so more than once.

While the longitudinal research is limited, Toomey, Ryan, Diaz, Card, and Russell (2010) can attest to the long-term nature of negative mental health outcomes. In their retrospective study of 245 LGBT young adults, the researchers found that not only did the negative impacts of homophobic bullying impact students at the time of those experiences, but this was also significantly associated with negative psychosocial adjustment and lasting impacts extending into young adult years. According to their research, this long-term impact also had the potential to impact one's quality and ability or capacity to enjoy life.

Academically as well, schools are often a negative place for gender and sexual minority youth and experiencing bullying in such contexts can have negative implications for student success. For example, Swearer et al. (2008) found that boys who are bullied by being called gay tend to hold more negative perceptions of the school climate, and in a survey of 350 sexual minority youths, D'Augelli, Pilkington and Hershberger (2002) found that up to half of respondents experienced verbal abuse in high school because of their sexual orientation. Peter and Taylor's (2013) study of Canadian students found that compared to the 15 percent of heterosexual students who reported as such, 78 percent of transgender and 62 percent of sexual minority students felt unsafe at school. Such research clearly demonstrates how the educational environment can be an unwelcoming, if not hostile, place for SGM youth, in part due to the presence of GSB.

When faced with such unwelcoming contexts, some students have been shown to engage in avoidance tactics. In Peter and Taylor's (2013) study, 30 percent of sexual and gender

minority students reported avoidance behaviours in the form of skipping school due to feeling unsafe either on the way to, or while at school. This was particularly true for transgender participants who were most likely to have skipped over ten days of school. Peter and Taylor (2013) also found that feelings towards school attachment were further impacted by experiences of homophobic or transphobic bullying.

Another important finding is that absenteeism is likely to begin at younger ages for sexual minority youth than for heterosexual youth. In Robinson and Espelage's (2011) study of students from Wisconsin, the researchers found that about 22 percent of surveyed LGBTQ students had already begun skipping school in the middle school years compared to seven percent of their sampled heterosexual peers, which later doubled to 14 percent during the high school years, while sexual minority student rates of absenteeism remained stable from middle school to high school.

Faced with hostile school contexts and employing coping strategies that may involve avoidance tactics means that later educational transitions could be negatively impacted. Research has suggested that students who experienced high levels of victimization based on their gender or sexual identity were more likely to report plans that did not involve pursuing any type of post-secondary education compared to those students who had experienced low levels of victimization (Kosciw, Greytak, Diaz & Bartkiewicz, 2010). Aragon et al. (2014) have also found that the victimization of LGBTQ students also partially impacts intentions to finish high school and attend a four-year college, although the authors contend that more research is needed to investigate the motivations of LGBTQ students.

From the above literature, it is clear that the consequences of bullying, and GSB in particular, are severe and far-reaching. This provides the necessary support for current intervention initiatives, and further highlights the need to consider sub-types of bullying that may result in differential impacts on certain groups. Based on this need for intervention, schools have worked on addressing this issue and a variety of anti-bullying initiatives have been introduced in schools around the world. In order to contextualize the current study and to provide a baseline understanding that can be used to determine



improvements, it is important to consider what is currently being done in the Ontario context to address the issue of bullying and to target identity-based forms such as GSB. Furthermore, it is beneficial to highlight the strengths and weaknesses of the current initiatives based on existing literature and by considering the potential issues that arise with the implementation of Ministry expectations in everyday school contexts. Once this information has been presented, a theoretical explanation of the issue can be used to further illustrate why anti-bullying measures are likely to be limited in their effectiveness when it comes to addressing bullying. Theoretically framing how the heteronormative school context enables GSB will also illustrate how further changes at an institutional level need to be made to better prevent GSB and also build resilience amongst the SGM students to mitigate the negative consequences associated with being a target.

## Chapter 3

### 3 Addressing Bullying – A Review of Anti-Bullying Initiatives in Ontario

Internationally, the right to education has been enshrined in Article 13 of the *United Nations International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*. This declaration also states that education “...shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and the sense of its dignity, and shall strengthen the respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms” (General Assembly, 1966, 13(1)). Because bullying may be an impediment to such goals, it has been framed as problematic by the United Nations and tackling this issue has been deemed necessary to address their fourth Sustainable Development Goal which “...aims to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” (UNESCO, 2019, p. 2). This international human rights focus is mirrored in Ontario’s anti-bullying initiatives.

Within Ontario, bullying has been highlighted as a potential obstacle to educational success and a barrier to ensuring a safe and inclusive school environment. It was specifically addressed in the 2012 amendments to Ontario’s *Education Act* under Bill 13 which requires schools to “promote the prevention of bullying” (*Accepting Schools Act*, 2012, s. 3(1)). This wording not only necessitates a response to bullying, but also shifts the focus to outlining prevention as a key responsibility of schools. Based on this legislative and rights-based approach to education, the Ontario Ministry of Education has clearly taken steps to frame bullying as problematic and to outline ways to address the issue.

#### 3.1 Bullying within the Ministry Context – Is GSB a Concern?

On their website, the Ontario Ministry of Education lists the steps that are being taken to help prevent bullying in schools. Such initiatives include: (1) highlighting the relevant legislation that has been set out to require safe school initiatives; (2) providing the policy documents that outline what bullying is and what the expectations are when this

behaviour occurs; (3) referencing the Safe Schools Strategy and progressive approach to discipline that has been adopted; (4) making information on the strategies that schools are adopting to ensure equity and character development available; and (5) providing information about resources that are available to schools to help prevent bullying (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013). The Ministry has also designated a week in November as Bullying Awareness and Prevention Week as a time specifically intended for students to learn more about bullying and to share in different activities that promote an anti-bullying ethic of care (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2018a).

Overall, the Ministry of Education and the resources that have been outlined above, tend to put forward a general notion of bullying, including identity-based factors insofar as the definition and explanations of bullying include the diversity of reasons for which someone may be targeted. This list of factors includes “size, strength, age, intelligence, peer group power, economic status, social status, religion, ethnic origin, sexual orientation, family circumstances, gender...race, disability or the receipt of special education” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2012a, p. 4). A 2012 amendment also added gender identity and gender expression to this list.

While such identity-based forms of bullying fall under the scope of this general definition of bullying set out by the Ministry and have been listed as forms that must still be addressed, they nonetheless remain encapsulated under a generalized notion and are part of a ‘one-size fits all’ framework that has been subject to critique. Winton and Tuters (2015) have laid out several criticisms regarding this approach, and in doing so, support the argument made here that forms of bullying vary, with homophobic or gender-based bullying differing from other more generic forms. Thus, GSB should be understood and dealt with differently, through ways that take this particular identity component into account.

In addition to the standardized definition of bullying, the repercussions and uniform responses required of teachers and administrators also tends to prevent consideration and incorporation of the “...individual and contextual knowledge, experience and needs of [the] students” (Winton and Tuters, 2015, p. 136). Based on this, Winton and Tuters

(2015) make the claim that this more general approach fits with neoliberal and neoconservative methods of control and discipline in providing a safeguard for schools and boards that shifts the blame to individuals who bully, or those (either bystanders or authority figures) who fail to report bullying. Nonetheless, there are some ways that individual boards, schools, and administrators can still utilize their discretion or go beyond these basic requirements and integrate elements of identity-based bullying into ongoing discussions.

For instance, Winton and Tuters (2015) explain how the Ministry's *Supporting Bias-free Progressive Discipline in Schools: Suggested Approaches and Practices for School and System Leaders* document encourages principals to consider mitigating factors in situations of bullying (although this is not a requirement), and to utilize discretion such as considering in-school suspension (when possible) as a less exclusionary alternative to suspension from school. This supplemental document includes scenarios for use in professional development activities and has further links to external resources and supports that are recommended, but not required.

While the provision and use of such supplementary materials is a promising step towards better addressing specific forms of bullying and the complexities of this behaviour, the extent to which the identity-based sub-types of bullying such as GSB are addressed within those materials should be considered before they can be focused on as an effective means to move beyond a general approach. Issues become apparent through a closer examination of such supplementary material. As an example, the *Progressive Discipline in Schools* document (Ontario Ministry of Education & Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2013) referenced by Winton and Tuters (2015) includes scenarios that educators can run through or think about to better inform their responses to instances of bullying that focus more around elements of identity. One such scenario included in Appendix A of the document focuses on the actions of one student named Bill, who is being suspended for assaulting another student named Tom, who according to Bill, had called him gay. Bill admits that he had been bullied by other students over the course of the year and had previously been in trouble for outbursts (that had never otherwise been connected to the bullying by either himself, or the principal). The situation also describes

the reaction of Bill's parents, and their question of why the school had done nothing to intervene prior to that point. A series of follow up questions are included after the vignette that can be used to encourage teachers to think about the array of issues in this scenario, the possible responses that could be implemented, and also the "informal and formal mechanisms [that] could be put in place to support a safe and trusting environment for reporting instances of bullying/harassment" (Ontario Ministry of Education & Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2013, p. 24).

Since this scenario is intended for use during professional development days, posing such open ended 'Questions for consideration' allows for discussions regarding discretion which is a positive alternative to laying out a standardized step by step script for teachers or principals to follow. This would also likely leave open the possibility for educators to discuss some of the issues that are most pertinent to their school environment (i.e. whether something like this has happened before, or whether this scenario is similar to another form of identity-based bullying that they are more familiar with).

Despite these benefits, there are a few potential issues with this material and approach. First, there is an emphasis that seems to be given to physical forms of violence. For example, the word choice assault is clear and evocative compared to other behaviours described such as "...called him gay" and "...had been bullied" (Ontario Ministry of Education & Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2013, p. 24). Such phrasing would likely prioritize violence in the minds of the educators given the tendency for physical altercations that conform to dominant or stereotypical conceptualizations of bullying to receive more attention than other discriminatory instances of bullying (Winton and Tuters, 2015).

Secondly, the vague reference to "been bullied" does not clearly illustrate the specific behaviours that should and would be identified as bullying nor does it clarify whether the previous bullying experiences that were based on Bill's real or perceived sexual orientation would be understood as identity-based forms. As the Ministry's standardized definition of bullying is open-ended to allow for a variety of behaviours to be classified under the term bullying, it lacks the inclusion of specific examples that may provide

educators with more information on what such behaviour actually looks like or how it may manifest. The provision of examples is where such supplemental training material comes in, however given that this connection may not be made explicit in the material, as suggested here, this puts the onus on educators and administrators to correctly interpret behaviours as bullying, whether in a general sense or on the basis of identity. As previously suggested and as supported by the ideas of Winton and Tuters (2015), the issue of reliability would likely be less significant in instances where the bullying behaviours fit within a stereotypical understanding of what constitutes bullying (e.g. physical) but would understandably be more of a concern in instances where behaviours are less clear, for example in the case of calling someone gay and whether or not this would count as a form of bullying just as much as the physical assault.

Lastly, the list of open-ended questions that are given after the description of the scenario do not contain any references or connections to identity-based forms of bullying or discrimination that would ensure educators make reference to this sub-type of bullying when discussing or evaluating this scenario. While it is likely that many, if not most educators would be aware of the complexity in this case and would also be able to recognize the topic of sexual orientation written in as an underlying factor, the potential remains for others to be unclear about, overlook, or disregard this connection unless explicitly noted in the supplemental material.

From this example alone, it is clear that effort has been put into providing resources to help prepare educators for dealing with issues of bullying and more complex scenarios that involve elements of identity. While one example is not an exhaustive representation of the supplementary materials provided to educators to help prepare them to deal with student interactions such as bullying, it nonetheless provides a further reason to question the effectiveness of the ‘optional add-to-the-basics’ approach that appears to guide anti-bullying initiatives in Ontario schools. In failing to address specific examples of GSB or including this as a specific concern in the follow-up discussion points of non-mandatory materials, the Ministry effectively increases the discretionary powers of educators and exacerbates the potential for insufficient or oversimplified responses to specific forms of identity-based bullying.

### 3.2 Making Room for Anti-GSB Initiatives – Minimal Requirements and Regional Variation

Another example of the ‘optional add-to-the-basics’ approach to bullying lies in the potential for regional variation in efforts to educate educators. The policies and initiatives laid out by the Ontario Ministry of Education provide a base line requirement for school boards and individual schools to adhere to. Additionally, schools and school boards can further advance their own programs and resources to improve upon this foundation. For example, the Toronto District School Board is the largest school board in Canada and is also one of the most diverse when considering student, teacher and administrator populations (TDSB, 2014a) and is an example of one which has built upon the base-level Ministry standards and resources.

The strategies that the TDSB has employed to deal with GSB (some of which are derived from Ministry expectations) include: (1) establishing a Gender-Based Violence Office responsible for promoting healthy relationships and safe environments (TDSB, 2014c); (2) revising their Equity Policy to “...set a consistent policy direction to guide subsequent policy and operational procedure reviews, using an equity lens and supporting a continuum of actions to support the achievement and well-being of all our students” (TDSB, 2018, p. 1); (3) having a Caring, Safe and Accepting Schools Team that “...works to foster a safe, inclusive and positive school climate” (TDSB, 2014d, para. 2); and (4) establishing the Triangle Program which is an alternative LGBTQ focused high school for disenfranchised youth who are unable to attend a mainstream school setting (Russell, 2006). These initiatives are provided by the TDSB alongside other specific programs or resources targeted towards different aspect of diversity and inclusion with the goal of ensuring educators are prepared to deal with such elements of diversity in their schools and classrooms.

Although the development of additional supports would be valuable and could better address the specific characteristics and needs of the diverse school environments across Ontario, not every school board or school would have access to the money, time or personnel needed to develop and implement such supplemental resources and initiatives. With districts unable to develop their own improvements on an even-footing with one

another, this add-on approach to diversity education and policies can further be complicated with the responsabilization approach that places the onus on educators and administrators to educate themselves through the use of the non-mandatory supplemental materials and through their own learning and continuing education.

Currently professional development is required by the Ontario Ministry of Education, and mandates that teachers become educated about bullying prevention and the promotion of positive school climates (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2018b). What is important to remember however, is that this continued education is not restricted to gender and sexuality issues alone. As expressed by Rayside (2014):

[b]eyond the standard curriculum, which itself is heavily packed, teachers are expected to be knowledgeable in responding to a wide range of student needs and circumstances. In those boards with expansive equity policies, educators are also expected to take differences along lines of gender, race, ability, Aboriginal status, and religion into account in all that they do, a challenging task even for the most knowledgeable and committed. (p. 212)

Tasking educators with preventing and dealing with instances of bullying (both in general terms and that which is based on various identity differences), on top of the demanding educational and administrative responsibilities involved in the running of an everyday school or classroom creates another avenue through which implementation issues may arise and the best-intentions of anti-bullying measures may fail or may be unevenly implemented across regional areas.

### 3.3 Making Room for Anti-GSB Initiatives – Positive Climates and Gay-Straight Alliances

While the Ontario Ministry of Education has tended to adopt a general approach to bullying, the area where identity factors appear to be featured more directly is in the requirement laid out in Bill 13 that schools foster an inclusive and accepting environment. Aside from the adjustments specific to bullying, Ontario's 2012 amendment included changes to ensure that the onus is shifted onto schools and school personnel to mandate the promotion of "...a positive school climate that is inclusive and accepting of all pupils, including pupils of any race, ancestry, place of origin, colour,



ethnic origin, citizenship, creed, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, age, marital status, family status or disability” (*Accepting Schools Act*, 2012, s. 3(1)). One such way that educators have sought to improve school climates is through implementing Gay-Straight Alliances or GSAs.

In practice, newly formed or existing student groups that attempt to provide a safe and accepting space for gender and sexual minority youth have more recently tended to adopt a name change away from Gay-Straight Alliance to alternatives that are more inclusive. For example, the Gay-Straight Alliance Network underwent an official name change to the Genders and Sexualities Alliance Network in 2016 (Brelsford, 2016). The alternative names are an effort to challenge the restrictive focus of the original binary conceptualization to be more encompassing and inclusive. Regardless of the name that students choose for their group, Bill 13 requires all boards allow for the formation and naming of such groups when initiated by a student (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2012b).

While research on the effectiveness of GSAs for improving psychosocial outcomes for LGBTQ youth is mixed, there is some evidence that suggests that even the presence of GSAs in school can have a positive impact on students through improvements to feelings of school safety and personal empowerment (St. John et al., 2014; also see Seelman, Forge, Walls & Bridges, 2015 for a summary of research findings). Furthermore, a longitudinal study has connected the presence of GSAs to a reduction in homophobic bullying experiences in school (Ioverno, Belser, Baiocco, Grossman & Russell, 2016).

While direct connections between GSAs and individual level improvements or a reduction in GSB may be harder to support, researchers have more commonly reached an understanding that the benefit of GSAs lies more in the effect on school climates (Schneider, Travers, St. John, Munro & Klein, 2013). To have such an impact however, it is imperative that GSAs are “...visible, active and a significant part of the school community and must be sustainable from year to year, regardless of student or staff turnover” (Schneider et al., 2013, p. 136).

Broad-based research that investigates the sustainability patterns and overall effectiveness of Ontario GSAs is not currently available, but the legislation itself highlights a potential issue with ensuring the availability and sustainability of such groups. A key concern is that the phrasing in Bill 13 places the onus on students to demand the presence of such groups. As research has suggested, even when a GSA exists, not all students are equally motivated to participate in the group (Heck, Lindquist, Stewart, Brennan & Cochran, 2013). If students vary in their willingness to participate, it logically follows that not all students would be willing or interested to lead the charge to form a GSA-type student group if their school does not yet have one. This may also fluctuate based on the cohort of students and could thus have implications on the long-term presence of such groups. Thus, while GSAs appear to be a promising way to challenge the occurrence of GSB, improve perceptions of school safety, and promote accepting school climates, their implementation is not without some potential limitations that may limit the effectiveness of this initiative.

### 3.4 Making Room for Anti-GSB Initiatives – Curricular Changes

Another mechanism that has been proposed to deter bullying is the inclusion of anti-bullying initiatives implemented through curriculum changes. Although Vreeman and Carroll (2007) found that curricular reforms alone were less effective than other attempts to eliminate bullying, the curriculum should not be disregarded as a potential mechanism for instituting change when it comes to broader school environments, nor should it be ignored as something that could contribute to anti-bullying initiatives.

When the curriculum is designed to address issues of bullying and inform students about the inappropriateness of the behaviour and the negative consequences, it can be a beneficial tool for bringing more attention to the issue and working to prevent the behaviour. Further and relevant to GSB, reforms that challenge and change the traditional heteronormative curricular content of schools which have traditionally socialized students to adopt these expectations and values can then be used to address the power and privilege of cis-gendered heterosexual individuals.

In terms of the Ontario context, the curriculum has received much attention in recent years given revisions to, and revocations of, the Health and Physical Education curriculum. The Health and Physical Education curriculum was revised in 2015 under the direction of a Liberal provincial government. The revisions that were made to this section (which includes a focus on sexual health, reproduction, non-heterosexual and gender identities) was an effort to address the issue of equity and inclusion in schools, to adapt to the changing nature of society (i.e. media and smartphones) and student populations (i.e. earlier onset of puberty amongst students), and was implemented in the spirit of equipping students with the information and tools needed to keep themselves safe and healthy (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2015).

Beginning in the elementary grades, the curriculum was also designed to address the issue of bullying as a harmful behaviour and work to educate students on appropriate ways to respond to bullying situations (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2015). For example, students are expected to learn about the characteristics of healthy relationships and challenges to healthy relationships as early as grade three. Of those challenges, bullying is given as a potential obstacle that students or educators *may* choose to discuss.

Because of the way that the curriculum is written, there is a certain amount of discretion in the ways that educators can go about achieving or discussing the specific expectations. As the curriculum explains:

Most of the specific expectations are accompanied by examples, ‘teacher prompts’ (as requested by educators), and student responses. These elements are intended to promote understanding of the intent of specific expectations, and are offered as illustrations for teachers. *The examples and prompts do not set out requirements for student learning; they are optional, not mandatory.* (italics in original, Ontario Ministry of Education, 2015, p.20)

Therefore, although bullying was given as an example within this particular grade three learning objective, there is only the potential that this will be discussed since “[t]eachers can choose to draw on the examples and teacher prompts that are appropriate for their classrooms, or they may develop their own approaches that reflect a similar level of complexity” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2015, p. 20). Bullying is, however, featured

as a required learning objective for grade four as students are asked to “describe various types of bullying and abuse (*e.g., social, physical verbal*), including bullying using technology (*e.g., via e-mail, text messaging, chat rooms, websites*), and identify appropriate ways of responding” (italics in original, Ontario Ministry of Education, 2015, p. 140).

When it comes to identifying where the curriculum may address GSB more specifically, the 2015 version suggests that connections can be made between bullying and identity factors in grade five when students are asked to “demonstrate the ability to deal with threatening situations by applying appropriate living skills” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2015, p. 157). Accompanying this learning objective is the teacher prompt that asks: “What strategies could you use in a situation where you were being harassed because of your sex, gender identity, race, religion, sexual orientation, gender expression, body shape, weight or ability?” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2015, p. 157). Once again though, this only indicates a potential connection, as teacher prompts are not required.

The inclusion of sexual orientation and gender identity and expression is suggested as a potential topic that could be incorporated or discussed in earlier grades and are included as potential topics as early as grade three (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2015). Gender identity is not included as a required learning objective until grade eight, when students are expected to demonstrate an understanding of the concept, and “...identify factors that can help individuals of all identities and orientations develop a positive self-concept” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2015, p. 216). Sexual orientation and gender expression however, are both included as required elements in grade six as students must:

assess the effects of stereotypes, including homophobia and assumptions regarding gender roles and expectations, sexual orientation, gender expression, race, ethnicity or culture, mental health, and abilities, on an individual’s self-concept, social inclusion, and relationships with others, and propose appropriate ways of responding to and changing assumptions and stereotypes. (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2015, p. 177)

While this revised curriculum made promising steps towards addressing the issue of bullying and also introduced students to information about gender and sexual diversity

(which could potentially impact the prevalence of GSB), the implementation of the 2015 revisions did not go uncontested. Negative responses and parental and community opposition was widely featured in the Ontario news media following the introduction of this version. For example, some parents felt that the changes made were too explicit and they did not want their children exposed to such ideas. Others involved in the writing of the curriculum maintained that the fears and concerns of parents were based more on misunderstandings about what would be taught to or discussed with students (Brown, 2015). Still, some parents cited concerns that homosexuality was promoted through the curriculum (Brown, 2015), and claimed that this was an attempt to override religious rights (Chanicka, 2018). This opposition was also accompanied with efforts on the part of parents to ensure their children were not exposed to the elements of the curriculum that they were opposed to. As Bialystok and Wright (2017) stated:

In one elementary school located in one of the hotbeds of opposition, a Toronto neighbourhood with a dense population of recent Muslim immigrants, half of the enrolled students – approximately 350 – were absent on the first day of school in 2015. Journalists’ images showed them seated on the lawn outside the school, being taught by community members, mostly women wearing headscarves. Later calculations showed that, as a direct result of the protests, public school enrollment has dropped, teachers had lost their jobs, and new private Islamic schools were springing up around southern Ontario. (p. 348)

This quote showcases how some parents protested by removing their children from schools for a period of time to express their disagreement (Brown, 2015), an occurrence which continued throughout the year, in addition to the removal of children from lessons based on the Health and Physical Education curriculum.

Under Ontario’s *Education Act*, parents have the right and ability to withdraw their child from classes that cover content they do not want their child being exposed to (Csanady, 2015). This means that parents can withdraw their children from health and physical education classes when they do not want their children to be educated about the ideas or topics being addressed in the classroom. On the other hand, what the *Education Act* does not allow for, is the right to withdraw and prohibit students from learning about gender and sexual diversity and the respect for such differences in Canadian society in other

areas of their education (Csanady, 2015). Additionally, the *Ontario Human Rights Code* ensures freedom from discrimination for gender and sexual minority individuals and maintains that “[e]veryone should be able to have the same opportunities and benefits and be treated with equal dignity and respect” (Ontario Human Rights Commission, n.d., para. 1).

Between the 2012 amendments to the *Education Act* which requires schools to facilitate the inclusion of diversity education in the classrooms, and the *Ontario Human Rights Code* which protects educators from complaints about addressing such issues in the classroom, the curriculum still appears to be the most widespread and consistent way to implement changes to challenge the heteronormativity of school cultures and work to prevent GSB behaviours, despite the potential of parental opposition to curricular content. This potential exists insofar as elements of gender and sexual diversity are not only relegated to the Health and Physical Education sections of the curriculum, and individuals are not allowed to opt their children out of those other areas where such equity discussions may occur.

Capitalizing on the parental opposition, in August 2018 the Conservative provincial government repealed the 2015 version of the curriculum and required the re-implementation of the 2010 version that schools had previously been using. This 2010 version included a growth and development section which had previously been integrated in 1998 and had remained unchanged since then (Ophea, 2012). This version remained in effect while the government conducted province-wide public consultations but was eventually replaced with the 2019 version of the curriculum which was first implemented in September 2019. While this newest version does not eliminate the elements that address gender and sexual diversity and the topic of bullying, a few key changes are of note.

Within the 2019 version, bullying first appears in the grade one material as a suggested prompt that could be used to discuss how students can differentiate between caring behaviours and behaviours that could be harmful to one’s physical and mental health (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2019a). During grade three, students are then asked to

identify characteristics of healthy relationships and ways of responding to bullying behaviour. This appears to be the first instance where bullying is included as a required component.

In grade four, students may be introduced to the idea of identity-based bullying as a prompt describes how students could discuss the various types of bullying that they may encounter. The curriculum states “When any type of bullying is used to target someone because of who they are – their ethnocultural background, gender, abilities, or socio-economic status – then it is also an example of identity-based bullying.” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2019a, p. 173). The extent to which GSB would actually be addressed is questionable and thus variable since this is a suggested prompt, with the example only suggesting how gender might factor in but not further examining what this gender-based bullying may look like.

By the end of grade five though, students are also expected and required to know how actions, including making homophobic comments, can affect another’s feelings, self-concept, and also their well-being. Grade seven is where the current curriculum clearly and explicitly requires students to consider the implications of behaviours that would fall under the umbrella of GSB, as it requires students to:

assess the potential impact on themselves and others of various types of bullying, abuse, exploitation, or harassment, including homophobic bullying or harassment and other forms of identity-based bullying, and of the type of coercion that can occur in connection with sexting and online activities, and identify ways of preventing or resolving such incidents.  
(Ontario Ministry of Education, 2019a, p. 258)

In looking at when students will be expected to focus more generally on aspects of gender and sexuality, the 2019 curriculum includes sexual orientation as a mandatory topic in grade five. This is when students will discuss this as something that can affect their self-concept, and this inclusion occurs one year earlier than it did under the previous 2015 version of the curriculum. Later in grade six, students are required to:

assess the effects of stereotypes and assumptions regarding gender roles and expectations, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, culture, mental health, and abilities on an individual’s self-concept, social inclusion, and

relationships with others, and propose appropriate ways of responding to and challenging harmful assumptions and stereotypes that can lead to destructive social attitudes including homophobia and racism. (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2019a, p. 232)

Grade eight is when there is the greatest requirement for students to learn about gender and sexual diversity as students are required to then be able to demonstrate their understanding of concepts such as gender identity, gender expression, and sexual orientation. Furthermore, learning initiative (D1.5) asks students to “...identify factors that can help individuals of all identities and orientations develop a positive self-concept” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2019a, p. 282).

Another important element that was introduced in 2019 was the implementation of *Policy/Program Memorandum No. 162*. This memorandum requires school boards to develop and implement a policy that will allow students to be exempted from the Human Development and Sexual Health Expectations and sections of the curriculum. According to the policy, this is the only section that students are able to be exempt from, and “[r]eferences to human development and sexual health made by teachers, board staff, or students outside the intentional teaching of content related to the Human Development and Sexual Health expectations are not included in the exemption policy/procedure” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2019b, p. 2). According to the document, all school boards must have their policy in place and available to parents prior to the discussion of this material in the 2019-20 academic year. While this exemption was said to standardize the opt out process (Jones, 2019), and thus make it easier for parents to exempt their children from this section of the curriculum, it was an option that was available to parents previous to 2019 and still leaves it open for the inclusion of such topics outside of this specific area.

Thus, since gender and sexual diversity is a topic that can be addressed in different areas of the curriculum and not just relegated to the Health and Physical Education sections, curriculum-based initiatives can continue to be seen as a fruitful way to address the factors underlying GSB. For instance, based on the legislation that is in place, educators have the ability (and the mandate) to include discussions of diversity in order to ensure that schools are accepting and inclusive. This could occur in a variety of different



curricular areas. As an example, the issue of the legalization of same-sex marriage, and the historical criminalization and ill-treatment of homosexuals could be discussed in a history class. Protection for teachers who attempt to integrate these discussions outside of the Human Development and Sexual Health section of the Health and Physical Education curriculum then rests with provincial human rights legislation which would support the integration of this material, regardless of the opposition from parents who oppose this inclusion based on cultural, religious or other grounds.

Additionally, teachers can reference the ethical standards set out by the Ontario College of Teachers. These standards provide the expectation that teachers will model respect for cultural values and social justice, and “...work to ensure that all their students feel respected, valued, and safe, and that their students treat others with respect, courtesy, and consideration” (Ontario College of Teachers, 2017, p. 4). Based this curricular perspective, the potential exists to disrupt the underlying elements of identity-based bullying, and although the direct effect on bullying remains questionable or limited, this broader educative initiative is promising in an indirect manner and in its support of those students who may be targeted for their gender or sexual diversity. Such discussions should continue to be protected under legislative and professional guidelines, as it remains a promising avenue for contributing to efforts to address and reduce identity-based bullying and creating a positive climate for students who may be targeted.

Now that the concepts of bullying and GSB have been laid out along with the evidence that supports intervention efforts, and several of the current anti-bullying and educational strategies that have been implemented in Ontario have been explained, it is beneficial to critically evaluate the question of why students bully. Doing so will allow for a further evaluation of current initiatives and will help to shed light on where efforts are best directed in order to address the issue and minimize the harm that comes from experiencing GSB.

## Chapter 4

### 4 Theoretically Framing Bullying – The Purpose of Put-Downs

Because the focus here is on attempting to understand the complex nature of GSB as a sub-type of bullying behaviour, this dissertation follows Thomas, Connor and Scott's (2018) argument that no single theory adequately explains bullying. Instead, bullying is seen as a relational issue involving more than one individual, and more than one external influence. Further complicating matters is the necessity of integrating the theoretical underpinnings of GSB as a particular form of bullying that encompasses aspects of gender and sexuality and the normative expectations that schools convey to students about those parts of their identity. Given this complex theoretical understanding, no singular explanation is sought. Theoretical ideas are instead combined to articulate the reasons why GSB is likely to occur, and why it is likely going to continue even in the face of ongoing initiatives to address bullying.

In addition to this multifaceted theoretical understanding, no singular solution is sought. Instead, a variety of intervention methods are considered as necessary to address the intricacies of GSB and the structural forces that sustain if not encourage this behaviour. Nonetheless, by articulating the theoretical reasoning for this behaviour, solutions may be crafted that are better suited to address the aetiology of the issue rather than addressing bullying instances only when they occur, and in a manner that treats all bullying forms as equitable in the same manner.

#### 4.1 Why Do Kids Bully? – Articulating a Status-Based Approach to Bullying

The terms power and status, although featured in numerous studies, policies, or definitions of bullying, are relatively underdeveloped theoretical elements in the context of bullying research. Given the centrality of power within the conceptualization of bullying one might assume that it would be featured more prominently with clearly outlined implications in explanations of bullying and intervention strategies, yet this is

often not the case. In relation to bullying, the notion of status power is particularly useful for illustrating why it takes place and why certain individuals are targeted by others. To explain such status-based notions of power, Murray Milner Jr.'s (2006) book *Freaks, Geeks, and Cool Kids: American Teenagers, Schools, and the Culture of Consumption* is key. Within his book, Milner (2006) defines status as "...the accumulated approval and disapproval that people express toward an actor or an object. As used here, it is more or less synonymous with notions of prestige and honor-dishonor" (p. 29). Based on this accumulated evaluation, individuals can be ranked in relation to one another within the context of a status hierarchy, whereby status becomes a mechanism to exert control over others and the environment.

While power in general allows someone to exert control over another, status power is particularly important in the context of students and school structures. As Milner (2006) explains, in comparison to adults, youth have limited access to economic and political power but have greater access to status power. Because of this they are able to create their own status systems within the bounded confines of the school environment and use status as a way of elevating themselves over others.

According to Milner (1994; 2006), one's position in a status hierarchy is based around four main sources or characteristics of status. The first source of status is adherence to norms. This relates to the often complex, subtle and shifting normative expectations and rituals that are learned and separate conformers and non-conformers. Milner (2006) gives the examples of "accent, demeanour, body language, and notions of taste and style" (p. 31) as normatively based mechanisms of status demarcation. Milner (1994; 2006) highlights that status is linked to social associations as the second characteristic. In this manner, having associations with others of a higher social status can lead to one's own social status being elevated, whereas associations with those of a lower social standing would have the opposite effect. This repositioning in a status hierarchy is due to the inexpandable nature of status, the third of the four characteristics highlighted by Milner (1994; 2006). Whereas other forms of power (i.e. economic) are expandable, status is based on a relative ranking. So, for one's status to be increased, another's must be decreased, with mobility tending to be restricted in settings where status is the main or

central resource (Milner, 1994; 2006), as is the case with school contexts. The final characteristic of status is that it is inalienable. Because status is based on an evaluation that occurs in the minds of others, it is very hard for others to reduce or take away one's status, unless the opinion of others changes (Milner, 1994; 2006). As such, status can be a relatively stable form of power, especially when evaluations are based on markers that are themselves unchangeable or fixed (i.e. gender or race compared to clothes and cosmetics) (Milner, 1994; 2006). This stability is certainly advantageous for those at the top of status hierarchies but provides a challenge for those who are initially positioned on the lower levels of status ranking.

According to Collins (2008), status systems become particularly important for social contexts that most closely resemble a total institution. Total institutions, as described by Goffman (1961), refer to closed communities that are separated from their surrounds and are structured so that most aspects of life are carried out in common. Some institutions, such as prisons and boarding schools are therefore more total than others depending on this level of isolation and the amount of control that is exerted within the institution. This is important to consider as it is in those most total of institutions that bullying is most likely to occur (Collins, 2008).

Although schools where students are not boarded and thus have easier access to other communities and social groups are less total than other educational institutions, they are still "...reputational systems, in which social identities are known by all and [a] prestige hierarchy is inescapable and pervasive in the activities of daily life" (Collins, 2008, p. 165). Therefore, under this logic, bullying would be more likely to occur in educational contexts that most closely resemble a total institution but would still be likely in other educational institutions where status is a valuable resource and students attempt to accumulate or reinforce their status-power over others.

In order to better connect the notion of status-power with the existence of bullying in schools, it is important to consider how bullying can thus be understood as a behaviour that occurs between individuals of differing status positions (and thus helps to explain the power element necessary for behaviour to be classified as bullying), but also serves as a

mechanism of negotiating or reinforcing one's status position within this hierarchy. Indeed, bullying others was mentioned by students as a way of gaining power or status and was the most likely explanation in Thornberg's (2015) study of student-identified explanations of bullying.

Given the inexorable nature of status hierarchies, for those located in the middle of the status hierarchy, bullying can be an attempt to shape the evaluations of peers to better one's own status position (Collins, 2008; Jacobson, 2013; Milner, 2006; Walton & Niblett, 2013). Because rank is relative, and association, or more importantly disassociation can impact status evaluations, there becomes a need for students to differentiate themselves from those of a lower or more stigmatized social standing. As Collins (2008) notes, those "...who want to move up are motivated to demonstrate their distance and superiority to [others in an undesirable category] by criticizing and rejecting them, and this causes them to use negative stereotypes" (p. 163). As Jacobson (2012) highlights, "bullying, then, becomes a public power move, leaving the perpetrator more securely 'inside' and the victim more clearly 'outside'" (p. 37). Students in the middle range of the status hierarchy who utilize bullying to influence status positioning can also help to explain the occurrence of the bully-victim or the situation in which someone may be the ongoing recipient and perpetrator of bullying attacks.

Jacobson (2012) has also pointed out the relational nature of bullying, not just as an interaction between the bully and the victim, but between the bully, the victim, and the peers who are frequently witnesses to such acts or behaviours. Because bullying is most often witnessed by others (Jacobson, 2013; Salmivalli, 2010), and status is rooted in the evaluation of an individual by peers (Milner, 2006), the denigration of the targeted individual in front of others often raises the bully's status in the eyes of witnesses and lowers the victim's, given the reciprocal and relational manner of status positions within an expansive hierarchy. Since research has found that bullying behaviour is not always widely rewarded by peers (Boulton & Smith, 1994), the extent to which this increases one's status can be questioned, but as long as the behaviour targets a lower-status individual and reinforces their negative status evaluation, it would help to reinforce the lower-ranked status position of targeted others.

If schools are likely to provide the structure that encourages bullying, it is also important to consider the potential impact when students transition between school contexts. In line with this concern, research has suggested that bullying is more useful at times when status rankings are likely open to reorganization, such as during the shift from middle to high school when the school environment changes and larger numbers of students converge within the school setting and status hierarchy (Salmivalli, 2010). As Pellegrini and Long (2002) have suggested, bullying increases amongst youth who were making the transition from primary to secondary school, arguably as a way to use this transition to attempt to establish dominance within the new setting and the new peer group. By this logic, once status and dominance patterns are again established within the new setting and peer group, the use of bullying as a mechanism of differentiation should lessen. Support for the logic of this proposition can be found with the literature that suggests bullying is more prevalent within the early years of schooling and throughout middle school, but seems to decrease as individuals get older and near the completion of high school (Nansel et al., 2001; Pellegrini & Long, 2004; Rofes, 2005). Thus, although there appears to be some differentiation between schools (e.g. based on grade level), as long as schools continue to restrict student access to other sources of power and encourage the formation of status hierarchies, bullying is likely to continue to be a tool for students to establish and reinforce their place within the school setting. While this theory thus helps to establish a social approach to bullying that is theoretically informed, it is imperative to also consider the reasoning for different types of bullying – in this case, GSB.

## 4.2 Considering Gender and Sexuality – GSB as Status Ranking

From his own research and through evaluating other studies, Thornberg (2015) outlined three key explanations of bullying, the first of which revolves around the idea that the victim is different and is thus targeted based on their deviance from a normative order. The notion of difference has been found elsewhere as a mechanism for explaining why individuals become subject to bullying (Walton & Niblett, 2013) or homophobic targeting (Plummer, 2001). Bullying can therefore be understood as a manifestation of the intolerance of diversity or deviance within peer cultures, and as a mechanism of

policing variance from the normative order, since “deviance must be persecuted lest it call into question the basic assumptions of the normative structure” (Milner, 2006, p. 90).

GSB can then be viewed as a form of policing that occurs to force compliance to gender roles (Brooks, 2000; Epstein, 1997), and as a tool for peers to regulate compulsory heterosexuality in school settings, thus reinforcing the dominant moral order (Davies, 2011). This dominant moral order is one that is given through (changing) cultural norms but is less obviously reinforced through the gendered and heteronormative structure of schools. The dominance and assumed ‘correctness’ or ‘naturalness’ of heterosexuality and cis-gender performativities over others thus provides a basis of evaluation that can be exploited in efforts to secure status-power. As one of the key elements considered integral in most definitions of this behaviour, power is thus given or claimed by those who adhere to broader cultural and social expectations and can then be used in social interactions to reinforce the differences and status-inferiority of those who identify as, or are perceived to be, deviant.

Combining a status-based explanation with such heteronormative expectations of gender and sexuality furthers the theoretical reasoning that underlies and explains GSB. While schooling environments are structured to facilitate and encourage status competitions, the broader cultural norms that frame understandings of difference (that are also reinforced through more and less visible elements of schools) help to provide a reasoning or justification for the lower status evaluations of those who do not conform, thus relegating them to the lower rungs of the status hierarchy, also leaving them more vulnerable to targeting by other students who seek to improve or maintain their own status relative to those at the bottom. While not necessarily related to GSB, research that supports the connection between lower status evaluations and notions of difference also helps to reinforce this understanding (Eder, Evans & Parker, 1995; Thornberg, 2015; Walton & Niblett, 2013).

Although Milner (2006) himself did not focus on GSB specifically, he did highlight several instances in his own research where gender normative and heterosexist attitudes were involved in the delineation of status groups and individuals of a lower social

ranking. For instance, in discussing the low to moderate social status of members of band or music groups, Milner (2006) explains that such individuals are commonly labelled “as ‘band fags’” (p. 75) by other students. Similarly, “drama queers” (Milner, 2006, p. 76) was another derogatory comment that was used to indicate a lower status. Milner (2006) asserts that such artistic activities are often seen as low status since they are non-athletic and thus opposite of the athletic student groups who tend to have higher status rankings. Additionally, the activities were also seen as being “unmanly” and thus activities for “sissies,” or “fags and queers” (Milner, 2006, p. 77) and participation in such non-sporting activities that are considered more “feminine” can lead to participants being perceived by their peers as being gay (Bortolin, 2010).

As Milner’s (2006) investigation suggests, the use of homophobic terms and insults is a common occurrence in school status competitions. The use of homophobic epithets as derogatory comments has been found within the Canadian as well as the American school contexts (for further information see Short, 2013 and Pascoe, 2007 for studies pertaining to the respective countries) and other research has indicated that much bullying involves the use of such homophobic terms (Poteat & Espelage, 2005; Poteat & Rivers, 2010), even amongst those with lower levels of prejudice (Poteat & DiGiovanni, 2010).

Thus, the use of homophobic epithets does not always correspond with assumptions about the targeted individual’s sexual identity (Pascoe, 2007; Plummer, 2001; Poteat, 2008), and the more general use of words such as ‘gay’ is not always intended by students to be a homophobic comment (Burn, 2000). Instead, expressions such as ‘that’s so gay’ is substitutable for terms such as ‘stupid’ or ‘lame’ (Bortolin, 2010). Indeed, Milner (2006) himself explains:

The common use of homophobic language when referring to bands and drama groups is, of course, another aspect of status manipulation. Few students actually think most of the members of these groups are actually homosexual. Rather, it is a technique to justify denigrating these groups by associating them with a category that is assumed to have even lower status. (p. 253)

Regardless of the intent, insofar as hierarchies of gender and sexual privilege continue to be maintained, such language has a marginalizing function (Poteat & DiGiovanni, 2010).



This serves to cast one's target as an 'other', while simultaneously functioning as a mechanism for distancing oneself and (re)establishing a higher status in opposition to this 'other' (Burn, 2000; Epstein, 1997; Jacobson, 2013; Plummer, 1999). When utilized in instances of bullying or harassment, this use of language can be seen as a result and reinforcement of the heteronormative culture of schools.

In this way, the use of such language serves to reinforce the presupposition that homosexuality is, and should be, related to a lower status evaluation which simultaneously demarcates those who are non-heterosexual as less-than or deviant. This can contribute to not only a lower social status for those who are targeted and perceived to be non-heterosexual or gender non-conforming but can also result in the isolation from others who are avoiding a similarly denigrated status positioning. Research that suggests students often avoid associating with others who have been targeted and labelled as gay out of fear that they may also be targeted themselves (Plummer, 1999) thus aligns with the logic of Milner's (2006) status association argument. The threat of being labelled as 'gay by association' and having a similarly denigrated status can help to explain social isolation experienced by victims of GSB as well as the choice of individuals to remain closeted or limit themselves to stereotypical and normative gender performativities in order to avoid being targeted. GSB, when understood in this manner, thus appears to be a consequence of rigidly gendered and heteronormative environments and also a reification of those normative expectations, insofar as it remains uncontested.

### 4.3 Considering the Context – Schools as Heteronormative Institutions

From the above discussion, it is clear that schools encourage a reliance on status-based forms of power, and bullying can be explained as a manifestation of the struggle over power within this context. As a particular sub-type of bullying, GSB is therefore reinforced through the status-based organization of schools and status evaluations that position SGM individuals in lower positions on the status hierarchy. Such negative status evaluations are tied to the dominance of heteronormativity which is an ideological framework that reinforces a privileging of the gender binary, heterosexuality, and male

heterosexuality above all. Schools, as shown here, reproduce heteronormative assumptions and thus also appear to facilitate the perpetuation of GSB.

Overall Canada has seen a growing acceptance of gender and sexual diversity in recent decades. Once criminalized through sodomy laws, then later changed to mental disorder until the removal of the diagnosis from the American Psychological Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual in 1973, homosexuality is now more broadly accepted in society as evidenced by the legalization of same-sex marriage in 2005. Furthermore, gender identity and expression were added to the *Ontario Human Rights Code* in 2012 (Rayside, 2014), and in 2017 at the federal level, to the *Canadian Human Rights Act* and the *Criminal Code of Canada* in order to provide protections against discrimination and as a basis for hate crime classifications.

Although such changes appear to represent a weakening of the broad-based cultural expectations of heterosexuality and the entrenchment of gender binaries, there are many ways in which these expectations are still reinforced through the social institutions, and in particular, through the school system. Indeed, despite overall signs of progress and greater acceptance, the argument has been made that the "...school policy response to lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender (LGBT) advocacy, across Canada, has been distinctly cautious when compared to actual societal change on these fronts, particularly at the provincial and territorial level, and [there] remains serious impediments to the creation of thoroughly inclusive schools" (Rayside, 2014, p. 191). This hesitancy has contributed to the persistence of hostile or overly negative heteronormative school climates for SGM youth and educators.

Acker (1990) reminds us to "...examine organizations as gendered processes in which sexuality also plays a part" (p. 145). Such a perspective allows for considerations of how schools help to construct gendered and sexualized identities through everyday interactions and the symbolized meanings that schools convey. Such interactions and meanings rest upon assumptions of compulsory heterosexuality (Rich, 1980) and binary sex divisions that also align with gendered power differentials. In many cases, these assumptions are more subtle than overt. This subtlety has helped to ensure patterns

become deeply embedded in school structures, resources, and practices, and therefore often remain unquestioned and unchallenged. While various sources document the ways in which schools constitute heteronormative and gendered organizations (see for example: García & Slesaransky-Poe, 2010; Leonardi & Saenz, 2014; Mellor & Epstein, 2006; Short, 2007; 2013; 2017), a few examples will help to more clearly illustrate this point.

One can begin with the structures of schools to illustrate the distinctions that reinforce a gender binary. Although the historical practice of separate school entrances for males and females (Thorne, 1994) has generally ended, the separation of males and females continues to occur most obviously through the use of same-sex washrooms/changerooms in schools. This segregation helps to produce (Ingrey, 2014) and police (Davies, Vipond & King, 2019) gendered subjects through the physical structure of educational institutions.

Furthermore, gendered spaces exist in a less formal sense through the delineation of certain classrooms as more masculine or feminine. For example, Short's (2017) research illuminated how "...some school spaces can be read as threatening, and some school spaces can be read as safer, depending on the degree to which the space is 'masculine' or 'heteronormative' or 'heterosexist'" (p. 82). This often meant that, second to gyms and physical education classes, machine, woodworking and metal shops were some of the most threatening spaces (Short, 2017) for students who did not fit with the gendered and sexual identities expected to occupy those spaces.

In many ways, what is taught in those classrooms through the official curriculum is also part of the gendered and heteronormative organization of schools. While some of the most obvious connections can be made to content of sexual health education classes that work to foster expectations of heterosexuality as scientific fact (Slovin, 2016), other areas of the curriculum also work to reinforce such expectations. For example, one can consider other examples in curriculum where "...the institutions of normative heterosexuality, such as marriage between two people of opposite sex, are positioned as

natural and hard to change” (Mellor & Epstein, 2006, p. 384). Walton (2004) provides a further summary indicating that:

[h]eterosexuality in schools is validated through pervasive discourse on teenage other-sex dating; straight sexual mechanics and pregnancy in sex education classes; straight territorialization (such as high school dances and prom nights); and mass media images, textbook representations, and fictional stories exclusively about and featuring heterosexual relationships. (p. 26)

Even when the privileging of cis-gendered heteronormativity is not explicit, the general exclusion of topics of gender and sexual diversity reinforces the dominance of hetero- and binary-based understandings. This exclusion of diversity is likely most clearly demonstrated in sexuality education (McNeill, 2013), but exists in other areas of the curriculum as well. As Short (2017) has explained, “the official curriculum generally lacks content about the achievements of LGBTQ historical figures or ignores their sexual orientation” (p. 66). Such exclusion or invisibility also extends to gender, as it is relatively uncommon to see books with gender transgressing characters used in schools, despite the usefulness of such books for opening up discussions of gender norms with children in elementary school (Ryan, Patraw & Bednar, 2013).

As Walton (2004) has alluded to, in addition to the set curriculum, textbooks provide another avenue through which information is provided to students that serves to convey normative ideals. As an example, from a content analysis of over 20 Québec secondary-school textbooks, Temple (2005) concluded that heteronormativity was enforced through “...dichotomizing heterosexuality and same-sex sexuality, normalizing heterosexuality, problematizing same-sex sexuality, and emphasizing a rigid distinction between male and female” (p. 287), and also through the silencing of non-normative sexualities and relationships.

While other research by Jennings and Macgillivray (2011) highlights how there have been improvements including a greater focus on diversity in texts, inclusions may still remain problematic through being relegated to a single chapter for example. This limited inclusion, while beneficial, arguably implies exceptionalism or non-normativity when the inclusion is truncated to a chapter, or single unit-based discussion and not integrated

more holistically throughout educational discussions. Other research suggests that texts can be a useful way to include such diversity in grades as early as elementary school, although teacher education is necessary for the successful use of such texts (Cumming-Potvin & Martino, 2014; Martino & Cumming-Potvin, 2016). Therefore, while the increased availability of textbooks that include discussions of gender and sexual diversity is thus promising, the "...liberal pedagogical interventions involving inclusion of 'the other,'...which are inextricably tied to celebrating diversity, do not necessarily require or lead to a critique of the heteronormative system..." (Cumming-Potvin & Martino, 2014). Such is especially true when other heteronormative elements of schools simultaneously remain unchallenged.

Another example of messaging is through the official policies of schools. Dress codes have recently come under increased public scrutiny with claims of sexism given the tendency to restrict and police females more than males (CBC News, 2019). While this is certainly concerning, it is important to consider the ways in which such codes may also be (hetero)sexist at the same time. For example, even though school policies are one of the most subtle ways that norms are conveyed, students are still able to pick up on the heterosexual assumptions that are conveyed through dress code policies (Raby, 2010). Dress codes thus appear to be another way that schools regulate and produce gendered embodiments that fall within a binary distinction, further underlined by the heterosexual presumption.

Socialization around such gender- and sexuality-based norms appears to begin as early as pre-school. Gansen (2017), for example, has conducted research which suggests that "...children as young as three years old are learning that boys have gendered power over girls' bodies" and "...heterosexuality is presumed (and at times encouraged) by teachers, even in our youngest social beings" (p. 269). Furthermore, because this "...occurs at an early age, the seeming naturalness of such differences is further underscored" (Martin, 1998, p. 510).

Teachers may also be responsible for conveying such heteronormative expectations in more indirect ways as well, for example through consideration of who does the teaching

or fulfills different roles in schools (Sargent, 2005). The way teachers perform their gender is also likely to have an impact on students, as it has been shown that male teachers often feel a need to perform their gender in a manner that is responsive to the feminine gendered nature of the teaching profession (Francis & Skelton, 2001), and students may mirror that which they see demonstrated by role models in the classrooms.

In addition, despite political and public support for the idea that schools and education should take place without sexuality, as Mellor and Epstein (2006) explain, this runs counter to the reality whereby many elements of education continue to educate “...*for* (hetero)sexuality” (p. 381). This includes how teachers have been regulated by the assumption that since schools are asexual spaces, they should be ‘non-sexual educators’ who should refrain from introducing topics of sexuality in classrooms (Mellor & Epstein, 2006). Simultaneously, some teachers:

...are able to draw on and deploy normatively gendered heterosexuality, positioning themselves and the children within this discourse. Thus, many heterosexual teachers will regularly make reference to their own family arrangements – children, husbands/wives, and so on. (Mellor & Epstein, 2006, p. 384)

While not problematic on its own, such practices become so when others cannot do the same to highlight the diversity of relationships and family structures. This tacit approval of heterosexuality through the silencing of difference again reinforces certain expectations amongst students.

From the above, it is clear that although there have been shifts towards greater acceptance of gender and sexual diversity in society at large, it is important to remember how institutional and organizational arrangements formed in a time when such diversity was less accepted and less obvious may retain some of those inherent biases and still function to convey those biases to students. In many cases this can be related to Dorothy Smith’s (1996) notion of ‘the relations of ruling’ and her critique of the absence of a feminine standpoint in the discipline of sociology. In the absence of differing perspectives, the initial gendered (and in this case heterosexual) perspective is taken as given and operates in a manner that is ignorant of other perspectives or modes of being. Therefore, as an

overall trend, heteronormative expectations of gender and sexuality are still present within the overt and hidden curriculum of schools. Arguably, this is changing as schools become more accepting of diversity and as critiques of such biases continue to be made through critical pedagogical initiatives. Nonetheless, such normative expectations have not yet been completely dismantled, and thus continue to set the stage for behaviours that attempt to reinforce such expectations through the policing of non-conformity.

#### 4.4 Schools Aren't the Same – Factors Affecting School Climates

Within Ontario, expectations of heteronormativity and gender binaries can be challenged through the work that is being done to address the issue of equity, often framed in the context of unwelcoming school climates. As negative school climates have also been connected to more an increased frequency in bullying (Hansen, Henningsen & Kofoed, 2014), and are also fostered through or given as the result of bullying in schools (Espelage, Hong, Rao & Thornberg, 2015), encouraging the development of positive climates appears to be a way to address bullying as an issue along with the heteronormative aspect of GSB. Furthermore, although school climates have already been introduced in the context of school GSAs, it is worth expanding on this idea again, to establish the theoretical relevance and highlight additional factors that work to shape the heteronormative nature of climates.

The Ontario Ministry of Education defines and explains the notion of a school climate as:

...the learning environment and relationships found within a school and school community. A positive school climate exists when all members of the school community feel safe, included, and accepted, and actively promote positive behaviours and interactions. Principles of equity and inclusive education are embedded in the learning environment to support a positive school climate and a culture of mutual respect. A positive school climate is a crucial component of the prevention of inappropriate behaviour. (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2018c, p. 2)

Thus, as indicated with the focus on anti-bullying initiatives discussed in the previous chapter, and here through the language of school climates, there are formal policy- and program-based mechanisms already in place in Ontario regarding school climates. These

initiatives can be used to challenge the heteronormative expectations and rigid gender expectations embedded in schools which can create hostile or negative climates for students, independent of and in conjunction with GSB. While there are school boards and schools that have done excellent work to address negative school climates, certain factors may still inhibit the development of positive climates and climates that continue to maintain a heteronormative gendered structure.

Because of the variance in implementation, school contexts can be placed on a continuum of more or less positive climates. A good example of this potential for difference is outlined in the research conducted by Short (2013; 2017) who has showcased the diversity of Toronto schools and the work that has been done to address GSB and gendered/heteronormative school cultures. As explained below, educators and parents/communities are two key factors that were present in Short's (2013; 2017) research that help to explain why some schools may be more accepting than others, and why some may therefore see a greater prevalence of GSB.

#### 4.4.1 Educators

As suggested in the previous chapter, school boards differ in terms of the resources that they have access to in order to supplement the Ontario Ministry materials that can help educators inform themselves to better address topics of diversity. The Toronto District School Board has been given as an example of one school board that has the resources and ability to supplement what has been provided by the Ministry of Education. Despite this resource-rich context, Short's (2013; 2017) research highlights that the use of such aids depends largely on the willingness of educators to incorporate what is made available, and their perceived need for such supports.

As Short (2017) explains, making resources available does not necessarily mean that they will be utilized. According to one of the educators that Short (2017) interviewed, some of the publications that the equity office provided ended up buried and unused in the vice-principal's office. The reasoning for the non-use was based on the limited time and money educators have. While this does not negate the possibility of other attempts to incorporate discussions of equity and diversity and is an issue that may not occur in all



schools, it again demonstrates an issue with the supplemental ‘optional add-to-the-basics’ approach that appears to be taken in terms of equity initiatives. In addition to what has already been said about placing the onus on teachers to self-educate, this lack of use also highlights a potential for further uneven implementation of diversity initiatives as well as the likelihood that some educators may not be fully prepared to engage in such discussions of gender or sexual diversity. The idea of unpreparedness in this context is supported by research that has found that the topics of gender and sexuality are less likely to be addressed in diversity-related teacher education when compared to topics of race/ethnicity, special needs, and language diversity (Jennings, 2007). In addition, other research has found that teachers often feel unprepared to deal with situations where harassment or bullying is tied to aspects of gender and sexuality (Meyer, 2008), or even when references to non-heteronormativity are brought up by students as early as primary school (van Leent, 2017). Clearly the role of teachers in developing positive and accepting school climates needs to be understood and factored into any efforts to address GSB and heteronormativity in schools.

Even when educators do take steps to implement diversity initiatives in the classroom, such efforts may not be as helpful as educators may intend them to be. Concern over the extent to which schools foster a limited acceptance of diversity has been highlighted by Aldridge, McChesney and Afari (2018, p. 155) who found a surprising positive association between affirming diversity (operationalized as “...the degree of acknowledgement, acceptance, inclusion and value perceived by students of differing backgrounds and experiences”) and bullying victimization. The authors explained how this association is likely based in the approaches that schools take in addressing diversity. Their position is that the complex issues of diversity may become over-simplified in practice, and thus instead function to highlight difference. Therefore, the researchers contend that it is not enough for schools to acknowledge diversity but instead go beyond this base level of understanding and focus on the “...more deeply-rooted beliefs and social discourses that can perpetuate prejudice towards those who are deemed to be ‘other’” (Aldridge et al., 2018, p. 168). Doing so would require a high level of teacher training and comfort in addressing such issues so as to avoid the over-simplification and reification of difference.

Others key players in schools may also impact the extent to which diversity is featured and integrated into climates. Research by Meyer (2008) has found that teachers sometimes cite resistance or a lack of support from school administrators as a reason for not including discussions of diversity in the classroom. As further explained by Rayside (2014), "...teachers will hesitate to act until there is a clear direction from their school's leadership or their board, and often even when such direction is given" (pp. 210-211). This is problematic as Short (2013; 2017) has illustrated that individuals at the administrative level, in particular vice-principals, tend to be more conservative. As DePalma and Atkinson (2009) have found, teachers may therefore feel limited and not "...go very far beyond what they could justify in terms of government policy, which itself often needs to be stretched somewhat to reach beyond careful tolerance discourses" (p. 846). Again, such limitations on inclusion may serve to reaffirm the idea of difference rather than diversity and again illuminate the issues associated with an 'optional add-to-the-basics' approach.

While outlining 'the basics' or the baseline level of expectations and facilitating further improvements is certainly a step in the right direction towards fostering a positive school climate, a final fundamental problem with this is that it largely rests on the perceptions of educators and their ability to evaluate whether or not they are providing an accepting climate that supports and ensures the safety of students. Yet, the notion of what 'accepting' and 'safe' looks like for students must also be considered. Again, Short's (2017) interviews with students are useful for highlighting how equity is fundamentally connected with feelings of safety for SGM individuals. For example, schools that prioritize more limited notions of safety over equity "...remain places where, for LGBTQ students struggling with their identity, self-actualization is not encouraged or possible...They perceive [the] lack of self-actualization as the most constant threat to the integration of their 'queerness'" (Short, 2017, p. 37). As explained elsewhere:

Dominant notions of safety – built mostly on considerations of physical aggression and danger – do not attend to the different ways that students experience school as a result of how *who they are* interacts with *where they are*: the collision of identity and school culture. (Leonardi & Saenz, 2014, p. 204)

Thus, schools that do not ‘add-to-the-basics’ and attempt to foster equity and challenge the “smog of heteronormativity” (Leonardi & Saenz, 2014, p. 209) that clouds school climates, may still be viewed as unsafe by SGM students, even if educators perceive otherwise.

#### 4.4.2 Parents and Communities

The role that parents and communities play in shaping school climates is another important consideration that must be taken into account. Not only can parental influence have a direct impact on school climates, but it can also be given as another factor that can influence the actions of educators and their willingness to challenge the heteronormative elements of education (Meyer, 2008).

There is some evidence to suggest that parents have been accepting of the inclusion of topics of sexual health in schools (including the topic of sexual orientation). In a study published in 2014 (prior to the implementation of the revised 2015 Ontario Health and Physical Education curriculum), researchers found that of the 1002 parents surveyed, 87% believed that sexual health education should be included in schools and 84% believed that this education should begin as early as middle school (McKay, Byers, Voyer, Humphreys, & Markham, 2014). Furthermore, results from the consultation process launched by the Ontario Conservative government after the 2015 revisions suggest that support for such topics still exists. The Canadian Press was able to obtain about 1,600 submissions to the consultation website and found that “...the vast majority called for the modernized 2015 curriculum to be reinstated” (Canadian Press, 2018, para. 3). Despite research that suggests parental support, the dominant pattern in the literature is for parents to be framed as either a real or perceived oppositional force when it comes to the topic of gender and sexual diversity. For example, based on questionnaires administered to 132 Ontario LGBT and heterosexual teachers or school administrators, Schneider and Dimito (2008) found that despite being invested in, and generally well-informed of LGBT issues, 56% of educator respondents cited parent protests as a key obstacle impeding their response to LGBT needs and issues in school. This has implications for school climates when the views and beliefs of parents and community members begin to influence what occurs in schools.

Reasons for parental opposition are varied but research frequently explains parental opposition as rooted in cultural and religious differences. For example, research has highlighted how Muslim, as well as Catholic, parents and colleagues can be perceived by educators as a factor that would inhibit their willingness to integrate topics such as homosexuality into classroom discussions (DePalma and Atkinson, 2009). Reference can again be made to the parental opposition to the revised Health and Physical Education curriculum. This opposition was in part voiced by parents and religious groups who cited concerns that the curriculum, through teaching of the existence and legitimacy of homosexual identities, overrode religious freedoms.

When one considers how real or perceived parental opposition may exert additional influence on educators and their willingness to include topics of diversity, or defend inclusion-efforts against religious and cultural opposition, it becomes clear that parents can be another factor that shapes school climates and the degree to which they are inclusive or continue to reinforce heteronormative ideals that can influence the likelihood of GSB.

#### **4.5 What this Means for Anti-Bullying Interventions – Ignoring the Root of the Issue**

When GSB is understood in the context of status-power, as rooted in heteronormative and cis-gendered ideals and fostered by the constrained status-based nature of schools and climates that are bound to differ in the extent to which diversity is tolerated or encouraged, it becomes clear that despite the best efforts of educators and policy-makers, the root of the issue may not be targeted through current anti-bullying and school-climate initiatives. Despite the progress that has been made in bringing this issue to the forefront of public understanding, and evidence that shows a decline in the prevalence of bullying which is often connected to whole school anti-bullying initiatives (Smith, Schneider, Smith & Ananiadou, 2004; Vreeman & Carroll, 2007), everything discussed thus far suggests the need to question the potential limits of current initiatives, especially when looking at GSB more specifically. As such, one can consider what else could be done, not only to better protect students from experiencing the negative effects of GSB, but also to consider the ways that schools can better address this form of bullying and the

heteronormative climates that contribute to this behaviour. To encourage further progress, incorporating the notion of resilience is beneficial.

## 4.6 But What About Now? – Resilience as a Necessary Tool for SGM Students

### 4.6.1 What is Resilience and How Does It Work?

In *Growing into Resilience*, André P. Grace and Kristopher Wells (2015) question how gender and sexual minority youth “...steel life in the face of adversity” (p. 3), or in other words, navigate the life stresses that they are presented with while also managing to show signs of thriving in comparison to others who experience an increased vulnerability and sensitization to similar exposure (Rutter, 2012). This notion of positively navigating negative life stressors represents the main idea behind the concept of resilience.

Academically, resilience should be understood as a “...multifaceted concept, construct, process, and outcome” (Grace & Wells, 2015, p. 289). As Johnson (2008) has claimed, it “...refers to both a *process* and *outcome* of coping in response to risk, adversity, or threats to wellbeing. It involves the interplay between internal strengths of the individual *and* external supporting factors in the individual’s social environment” (p. 2, emphasis in original). Thus, resilience is fostered through the presence or development of internal and external supports (Hinduja & Patchin, 2017), or as Fergus and Zimmerman (2005) have respectively labelled them, assets and resources.

Assets are the individual and personal factors the individual has access to “...such as competence, coping skills, and self-efficacy” (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005, p. 399). Other internal sources of support include self-esteem and self-control (Hinduja & Patchin, 2017). On the other hand, resources that tend to be external to the individual would include “...parental support, adult mentoring, or community organizations that promote positive youth development” (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005, p. 399), in addition to adult attachment, positive peer relationships, and a sense of belonging (Hinduja & Patchin, 2017). Therefore, schools and education can be viewed as a mechanism through which resilience can be fostered (for example, in helping individuals develop internal assets), but also as an external resource itself.

In thinking about how resilience works in relation to risks and outcomes, three general models have been developed (see Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005 for a more detailed explanation of the models). The model of greatest relevance in the current context is the protective factor model of resilience. This model looks at assets or resources as mechanisms that moderate the relationship between the risk and the negative effect. In other words, this model would focus on resilience as the resources and assets that moderate the relationship between experiencing bullying and the negative effects of those experiences. Under this model, schools and education, including anti-bullying initiatives, can be viewed as a resource or mechanism of resilience that can thus act as a potential tool for moderating the negative effects of GSB and climate of heteronormativity.

According to Grace and Wells (2015), research suggests that resilience should not be considered as a linear process, and there may be setbacks and stressors despite a resilient outcome. Rutter (2012) also notes that resilience may represent a small relative improvement in circumstance, rather than a greater superiority relative to the wider population. So, while resilience does not need to equate to great success in the face of opposition, even small achievements or successes in moderating negative outcomes should be understood and can be conceptualized as such.

Resilience is also content and context specific, meaning that supports may help individuals overcome certain, rather than all, risks (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005). Such a perspective can be of use when considering the ways that individuals faced with GSB have overcome or minimized negative effects or outcomes associated with those experiences, even if their success is limited to certain outcomes and they are still working to overcome others. In this way, individuals who experience bullying may be academically resilient and achieve success in an educational sense, despite simultaneously continuing to experience mental health problems. Ongoing mental health issues should therefore not be seen as something that negates their resilient status altogether. Instead, a resilient qualification can still be awarded for their academic achievements.

As a concept, resilience can thus help to shift the focus of research on bullying in a more future-oriented direction. For example, in questioning resilience in the face of bullying, an emphasis can be placed on efforts to overcome bullying and its negative effects rather than trying to focus solely on eliminating the behaviour. This alternative approach has traditionally been a secondary goal of interventions (Garner & Boulton, 2016). In conveying the benefits of focusing on resilience to educators and policy makers, it can be stressed that a resilience perspective puts the emphasis on ‘the little things’ (Johnson, 2008) or the “...everyday magic of ordinary, normative human resources...” (Masten, 2001, p. 235) that can make immediate impactful changes. In this way, resilience can encourage continual support for students currently impacted by bullying, while work continues to challenge broader social attitudes and educational structures that encourage or sustain the behaviour in the first place.

#### 4.6.2 Why a Resilience Perspective is Useful – Adopting a Critical Sociological Perspective

Resilience has traditionally been given as a psychological construct, measured through psychometric indices, where the focus is at the individual level and resilience itself is seen as an individual achievement (VanderPlaat, 2016). In recent years a more process-based approach has been adopted with greater focus given to the external factors that can help shape resilience, however sociological contributions to this body of literature have remained rare. Applying a sociological perspective to the topic of resilience does nonetheless provide a unique, critical and thus valuable, perspective.

Firstly, a critical sociological approach helps researchers think about SGM individuals who experience GSB in a manner that differs from the traditionally imposed risk-based perspective (Grace & Wells, 2015; Russell, 2005). This traditional approach tends to impose a dismissive and victimizing label that may not be representative of the diversity and reality of experiences of SGM individuals. Alternatively, a critical approach that applies a resilience lens can shed light on the agency that individuals exert in their day to day interactions and in response to broader settings, structures and norms (Grace & Wells, 2015). Under this approach, such individuals are thus better represented as ‘youth at promise’ (Grace & Wells, 2015).

Secondly, featuring stories of individuals who have displayed resilience may also be helpful for the SGM community by highlighting the process through which individuals have come to understand, develop and integrate different aspects of their identity, but do so in a manner that is more collective than individualistic. Traditionally, identity formation has been “...carried out against the grain of hetero- and gender-normativity and in relation to stigmatized SGM identities and marginalized SGM communities that many youth may find problematic or alienating” (Grace & Wells, 2015, p. 217).

Neglecting to acknowledge and showcase the ways that resilient individuals have been able to navigate identity formation in the face of this structure fails to illuminate pathways of identity formation for others, and other possible avenues for challenging the dominant normative order. Through adopting a sociological imagination, the macro cultural and structural forces that SGM individuals struggle against not only become clearer, but it also provides an way for individuals to “...see themselves not as disaffected individuals but as members of marginalized groups, where personal difficulties are reconceptualized as collective struggles” (VanderPlaat, 2016, p. 198). In this manner, and as Mills (1959) suggests, personal troubles can then be understood as collective public issues.

A third point that can be raised is that this perspective helps to challenge the dominant frameworks that position groups as ‘at-risk’ in the first place. Thus, a critical sociological resilience perspective allows for a questioning of what typically remains unquestioned, or a way to interrogate commonly accepted discourses and expectations. For example, being ‘at risk’ of negative outcomes inherently implies a deviation from a normative standard or what would be considered a positive or expected outcome. This would involve evaluations based on factors that are rooted in moralistic understandings of deviance and normativity. A critical sociological perspective, however, helps to highlight how conceptions of risk and the normative ‘measuring tools’ are themselves social determined. This social element is not captured in mainstream individualized approaches to resilience where adversity is framed as an individual challenge and resilience is viewed as a way for individuals to overcome obstacles so that they can reassert themselves into the status quo, or “bounce back” as Hinduja and Patchin (2017, p. 52) put it. This perspective ignores the socially constructed nature of the problem and thus eliminates the



possibility that the status quo might be problematic to begin with. With this outlook, the broader cultural, structural and discursive patterns that might be a source of adversity remain unchallenged (VanderPlatt, 2016). Adopting a critical view thus allows resilience to become a tool to “...fulfill the political and pedagogical task of queer theory” (Grace & Wells, 2015, p. 150), or act as a mechanism for challenging the dominant discourses that have been used to frame and control ‘deviant’ populations.

Finally, since resilience is a mechanism through which researchers can look at how things can be made better while not taking the structural/normative status quo for granted, it is a particularly useful concept for analyzing the changes that can be made to educational contexts. Given that anti-bullying initiatives may be subject to implementation failure and bullying behaviours often remain hidden from educators, there is a clear need to better prepare students to deal with any instances of GSB that they might encounter. A focus on resilience thus also allows for a questioning of how schools can become a resource and help those targeted students be more resilient, or how schools themselves (given their heteronormative nature) may act as a force that inhibits the development of individual assets that would otherwise better enable students to deal with the negative effects of being bullied. Therefore, this critical sociological approach can help to showcase how changes to educational contexts may more effectively target the issue through helping to ‘steel’ students who will continue to face GSB, but do so in a way that bridges the micro and the macro so the structural factors themselves are also changed in the process.

Of utmost importance then, is the way that a sociological approach to resilience:

...challenges us to shift our gaze from designing interventions that modify the anti-social behaviour of youth or that encourage individual pathways to resilience to developing strategies for working with youth that recognize and address the social conditions (e.g. social inequality and discrimination) that produce adversity and exclusion in the first place. As such, the focus is on the collective and the systemic (VanderPlaat, 2016, p. 197).

Viewed in this manner, a sociologically informed resilience perspective allows for a consideration of how individuals navigate the social environments of schools and attempt

to overcome the negative effects of GSB and the heteronormative environments. It also allows for a consideration of how individuals may have themselves exercised agency and worked to challenge or change the dominant discourses and social contexts that perpetuated or facilitated those threats and risks in the first place, and the areas of educational structures where changes are most needed. So, although resilience has been a construct typically conceptualized as operating at the individual level, it can also be considered as a way of connecting the individual with more macro level forces and looking at processional efforts to overcome obstacles and foster social change within an educational context.

## 4.7 Putting It Together – Study Objectives and Research Questions

From the earlier sections, it is clear that bullying, and GSB as a sub-type of bullying is an ongoing issue and one that has currently received the attention of educators and policy makers. Because change to address the status-based structure and heteronormative context of schools is ongoing, but slow to come, it is likely that GSB will continue to be an issue. Furthermore, the extent to which this issue is being addressed successfully in Ontario is relatively unknown given the limited data about the current extent of GSB, and the lack of publicly available evaluative assessments regarding current anti-bullying initiatives. Therefore, if the issue of GSB cannot be resolved (or will not be resolved in a timely manner), even with ongoing anti-bullying initiatives, mitigating the negative effects should be the interim focus for researchers and educators.

A resilience perspective, as outlined above, is thus useful as it allows for a consideration of how students have overcome some of the negative effects of GSB in addition to heteronormative school climates. This critical perspective also avoids an overly reductionist approach that makes resilience an individual level endeavour, and instead allows for a questioning of how broader institutional arrangements may impede the development of resilience. Furthermore, insights can help determine the ways in which current initiatives are successful and may also illuminate ways to more effectively foster resilience in students who will experience GSB in the absence entirely successful anti-bullying initiatives.

Based on this logic, the current study attempts to address gaps in the existing literature and ultimately investigate how school-based initiatives can be improved to help foster resilience amongst students to help them mitigate the negative effects of GSB. To do so, a two-stage qualitative research project was conducted, centering around six main research questions or points of inquiry, and two key populations of interest.

The first stage of the research process focused on the experiences of Ontario students who had endured gender and sexuality-based bullying but had since made the transition to post-secondary schooling. With this group, the key research questions were:

- 1) What were the experiences of students who encountered GSB?
- 2) How did students deal with their experiences or what supports did students have that might explain their resilience?
- 3) How could schools better support students and the development of resilience?

With this group, the intent was to fill a gap in the sociological literature which has seemingly failed to see the value in the concept of resilience, and to do so in a manner that avoids adopting a risk focused lens. Thus, this research is in line with VanderPlaats (2016)'s advice, in that:

...care must be taken to ensure that in doing [research, individuals] are not reconstructed as passive participants, robbed of their agentic positioning. Rather, as Theron and Donald (2013) urge, such interventions require transformative, participatory research practices which recognize that the only valid knowledge from which to initiate social change comes from the everyday understandings of those directly affected. (p. 198)

The second population of interest are those Ontario middle school educators who are tasked with dealing with GSB but are also key players in efforts to foster more accepting school climates. With this group the key research questions were:

- 4) What are the understandings and experiences of GSB from the perspective of educators?
- 5) How do educators deal with instances of GSB in their schools or classrooms?
- 6) How do educators feel about the student suggestions for changes that may help build resilience?

The focus on this group of educators thus helps to fill a gap in the literature which has largely failed to address the middle school context. Further, it allows for a consideration of the ways in which educational settings can be changed to help foster resilience, thus integrating macro level factors into an understanding that has typically framed resilience as an individual success.

## Chapter 5

### 5 Methods – Outlining the Research Design and Process

#### 5.1 Sample Populations and Participant Criteria

##### 5.1.1 Student Participants

For the first phase of the research, interviews were conducted with young people between 18 and 25 who were enrolled in at least the second year of post-secondary education. Participants self-identified as having experienced GSB (based on their real or perceived identity) while attending an Ontario primary or secondary school. Enrollment in this level of post-secondary education was considered to be evidence of academic resilience.

Because of this sampling criteria, the data gathered regarding student experiences with bullying was largely retrospective (with the exception of some more recent interactions that some participants described). The minimum age requirement was set to capture those in at least their second year of post-secondary education, and the maximum age was set to attempt to limit the extent of retrospective bias. Although subject to issues with recall, retrospective self-report data according to Rivers (2001) has been heavily relied upon in the bullying literature and thus was deemed as fitting and acceptable for the purposes of this research project. Focusing on past accounts also allows for the perspectives of students who might have been closeted, questioning, or in the process of coming out while in school to be incorporated to determine how different forms of support might be more or less important for different groups of students, or at different points in an individual's self-development.

Attendance at Ontario schools was required to ensure some degree of socio-cultural consistency, as well as a level of sameness in terms of the policy context that students would have been exposed to.

Lastly, the requirement that participants be open with their peers and family regarding their gender/sexual identity was intended to ensure participants were not accidentally 'outed' during the course of the research project since the intent was to conduct focus

group interviews. In the end, only individual interviews were conducted due to the sporadic participation of students.

### 5.1.2 Teacher and Administrator Participants

For the teachers and school administrators, only those who were employed in Ontario public schools at the time of participant recruitment were included. The provincial limitation carried the same intention as with the students. The goal was to keep the policy context uniform so that any discussion of the research findings could be grounded in the policies in place by the Ontario Ministry of Education.

The decision was also made to focus on educators who were responsible for dealing with middle school populations. In Ontario, middle school is considered as grades four to eight, and in some cases, school transitions occur in this grade range. For example, some students will attend a kindergarten to grade six school, and then a separate grade seven and eight school, followed by another transition to high school. Given that bullying behaviours tend to be higher around middle school compared to the later high school years (Nansel et al., 2001; Pellegrini & Long, 2004; Rofes, 2005) and school transitions have been found to be key periods of status reorganization (Pellegrini & Long, 2002; Salmivalli, 2010), middle school appears to be a key period when effective anti-bullying interventions are needed most.

Furthermore, issues of gender and sexuality are also likely to become more prevalent during the middle school years when students are experiencing the onset of sexual maturity and are becoming more interested in sexual relationships (Pellegrini & Long, 2002). Other research has highlighted that sexual prejudice tends to be higher during the middle school years (Poteat & Russell, 2013), and middle school students may have more hostile school experiences and less access to LGBTQ-related school resources (Kosciw, Greytak, Zongrone, Clark & Truong, 2018).

This decision can be further supported given the numerous calls for school interventions that address bullying earlier than in high school (Boulton & Smith, 1994; Espelage, Low, Polanin & Brown, 2015; Yeager, Fong, Lee & Espelage, 2015), and recognition that

addressing diversity and GSB in high school may be too late since students are ‘coming out’ or undergoing SGM identity development earlier than in previous decades (Grov, Bimbi, Nanín & Parsons, 2006; Robinson & Espelage, 2011) and sometimes even disclosing such identities to parents while in middle school (Savin-Williams & Ream, 2003). Simultaneously, when parental and community resistance is taken into account, middle school appears as a time period where changes that integrate measures to address gender and sexual diversity are likely to be contested. Therefore, this study’s focus on the experiences of middle school educators will help to shed light on a time period that should be of particular concern for educators, policy makers and academics alike, and will also help to gain a better understanding of the ways in which educators understand and interpret this form of behaviour, within the context of Ontario schools as well.

## 5.2 Recruitment

Three main methods were used to recruit the student population. The first method involved contacting student organizations at a large university in southwestern Ontario and asking them to distribute study information to their membership. Organizations that focused on aspects of gender and sexuality were approached, for instance a student Pride organization. Flyers were also posted around the campus with participant eligibility criteria, a brief description of the study’s aims, and contact information if students were interested in participating. The last method of student recruitment was through passive snowball sampling. For this, business cards with eligibility criteria and contact information were given to participants who were asked to pass along the information to friends or peers that might also be interested in participating. Students were compensated \$10 for sharing their time and experiences.

Although snowball sampling could open up the possibility to recruit individuals from outside the university environment, those who responded to the recruitment strategy were university-educated students. Only one student noted that they attended a different university than the institution where recruitment was centralized, but they reported similar post-secondary experiences to the other participants. No students from alternative educational contexts (such as colleges) responded to the request for participants or were reached through snowball sampling. As discussed in the limitations section, the

perspectives of students who were targets of GSB but chose to attend college, or those who did not attend any post-secondary schooling are also important to study as their experiences, understandings, and suggestions may likely diverge from those participants in this study. The main consideration in choosing to focus on recruiting from one university institution was largely due to having access to this group of participants. Furthermore, while narrowing recruitment strategies to focus primarily on university students does likely reduce the divergence in perspectives, it does allow for a deeper level of analysis that can later be supplemented by other studies aimed more towards recruiting from non-university student populations.

For the recruitment of teachers and other educators or administrators such as principals or school social workers, key informants already known to the researcher were contacted and asked to pass along the study information and eligibility criteria to others who might be willing to participate. Since the key informants worked within the Toronto District School Board, it was planned that most of the participants in the sample would also be from this area. This was a strategic plan as it not only allows for the Ontario policy context to be accounted for, but it also allows for the participant experiences to be situated in the context of the largest school board in Canada, and one of the most diverse (TDSB, 2014a). The TDSB has also worked to enhance their diversity initiatives and provide support to educators. Thus, this would be a school board where educators should be educated and prepared to deal with GSB and other efforts to enhance diversity and ensure schools are a safe and accepting environment. As with the students, business cards with eligibility criteria and contact information were given to participants to share with others. No compensation was provided for the second participant group.

Investigating the experiences of educators at religious-based schools is understood to be a particularly important task given research that has highlighted difficulties in navigating issues around equity and diversity in the context of religious schooling (see for example Callaghan, 2018). Limiting this sample and not including such educators was a strategic plan based on two key considerations. First, access to this group of educators was more feasible given that the key informants known to the researcher worked in non-religious school contexts. Secondly, investigating public-school experiences independent from



environments such as Catholic schools can provide a more general understanding of some of the challenges that exist for educators that may differ from, or be exacerbated in other religious-based contexts. Further research should seek to compare and contrast the experiences of educators in both contexts, especially to determine how province-wide mandated standards in terms of curriculum and school policies may be differentially understood and implemented, and to understand whether there are further or different barriers that educators face depending on the school context in which they work.

### 5.3 Ethical Considerations

Initial ethical approval was granted by the Non-Medical Ethics Board (REB) at the University of Western Ontario in March 2015. Compensation for student participants was not originally part of the recruitment strategy but given the initial lack of participation a revision was submitted to allow for compensation in the amount of \$10 per student participant. The revisions were approved by the REB in November 2015.

Although some may consider SGM individuals to be a higher risk population (and the framing of individuals in the academic literature as being ‘at risk’ certainly contributes to this perspective) the student group in this study was understood differently. Even though the target population were SGM who had previously experienced GSB, since this study focused on recruiting academically resilient individuals through passive methods (and thus would likely only come forward if they were comfortable discussing their experiences), it was considered unlikely that participation in this study would have negative repercussions as participants would not be as vulnerable as some may think.

At no point in the interview were students asked how they identified in terms of their gender or sexuality/sexual orientation. Most did disclose this information during the interview and clarified whether this was how they identified during the time period in which they experienced being bullied (i.e. whether they were ‘out of the closet’). Self-identified labels for each of the participants who stated such in their interview have been listed at the outset of the student results chapter.

The decision not to ask students to self-identify is one that can be questioned, yet ultimately supported. Although the expectation was that participants would be ‘out’ or open with their identities amongst their peers and family members, this does not necessarily mean that participants would be ‘out’ in all contexts. Coming out is considered a process (Cass, 1979) where individuals tend to ‘come out’ or disclose identities to themselves, then to others close to them such as peers and subsequently family members (Savin-Williams & Ream, 2003). Individuals may also determine the need to separately disclose their identity in other contexts such as at school or at work, or in other more distal social relationships.

Thus, it is possible that even though participants were expected to be out amongst their peers and family members, there might be contexts and groups that would not be aware of how they identified, and it is possible that they may not have felt comfortable disclosing their identity to the researcher, whom they likely did not know. Although participants would have the right to refuse to answer any interview questions, they were not comfortable with, the decision was made to not request a disclosure of identity based on respect for participants and their right to choose who they come out to. While this means that some participants did not identify during the interview process, their experiences and the commonality of being a target of this form of bullying was deemed enough to include their stories with those of participants who did self-identify. Furthermore, since this project was an attempt to understand the common experiences with GSB that transcend potential differences in real or perceived identities, no other identity-based sub-groupings of participants were deemed necessary.

For the educator population, given the public and institutional attention that has been paid to bullying in recent years and the requirement that teachers have of creating safe and accepting environments, it was expected that participants in this group would be comfortable with the subject material and discussions of this nature. It was also assumed that educators would likely have previously had conversations with their peers and would have been exposed to the subject material through the training they are required to participate in as part of their professional development. Because of this, in addition to the passive nature of participant recruitment, it was expected that educators would be

open and willing to share their perspectives and would also not experience any negative effects from their participation.

Any participants who agreed to be interviewed were given a letter of information and asked to sign indicating their informed consent to participate in the research. It was made clear that participants could refuse to answer any questions and were also free to end the interview at any point.

During the interview process only one participant had a moment where they became emotional when recounting their earlier experiences. Despite becoming emotional, the participant continued to recount their experiences after a few momentary pauses, independent of any additional prompting from the interviewer. This participant did not refuse to answer any questions, nor did they continue to cry or show any other signs of distress (aside from that one moment) throughout the remainder of the interview.

## 5.4 Methodological Justification

The intent behind this research project is to remain as close to the participant accounts as possible, while still providing a way of highlighting the similarities between participants beyond a focus on bullying as an issue that typically occurs and is tackled (certainly within education) on an individual level. Understanding such commonalities and themes should hopefully ensure that intervention initiatives can be designed or refined to tackle the common problems and needs of students and educators to ensure widespread benefits.

Interviewing was selected as being the most appropriate method for investigating this complex issue given several key considerations. First, bullying has already been shown to be a variable concept depending on the perspective adopted. Thus, research that pre-determines behaviours that constitute bullying based on a particular definition may not capture the personal interpretations adopted by those who perceive that they have witnessed or been a target of bullying. Because of this, it was important to select a method that would not pre-emptively eliminate individuals based on particular criteria that are in many ways considered variable or debatable when it comes to understanding this issue.

Furthermore, a more open-ended qualitative approach was useful for encompassing the diversity of lived experiences of participants and also allowed for an open-ended questioning of the resources that students felt were beneficial in helping to overcome or mitigate the negative effects of bullying. This would allow participants to include resources: that might not be present in the existing literature; may not be used in every school context; and also, would allow participants to frame supports in their own manner. As a critical sociological approach to resilience suggests, some behaviours that may be otherwise be classified as resistance could simultaneously be considered as elements of resilience. Qualitative interviews provide the opportunity to thus investigate expanded notions of support that would not be as easily captured through other quantitative methods.

Finally, qualitative interviewing allows a traditionally disadvantaged student group frequently deemed 'at-risk' by others, to have another platform to voice their experiences in a manner that has less of a chance at being filtered through a victimizing lens. In this manner their lived experience is considered paramount to understanding how best to move forward with effective interventions and the changes to schools that are needed to better enable the development of resilience.

For the teacher sample, the logic behind qualitative interviews is similar. Existing programs and policies that are grounded in academic research are certainly well-intentioned, but any challenges that educators face in implementing such initiatives must be considered to ensure meaningful change can be implemented. For example, if bullying is discussed one way amongst academics, but not understood in the same manner by those who self-identify as being bullied, and simultaneously not recognized as such by educators who may have a different perception of how bullying manifests, existing programs may be less effective due to such misalignment. Qualitative interviews are thus able to capture any potentially different educator understandings of bullying, along with any issues impacting the prevalence of GSB that may be found in the climate/culture of the school where the educator works.

Integrating the student suggestions into the teacher interviews was also an attempt to conduct interviews in an innovative manner. None of the bullying literature that was used in the course of this dissertation attempted to directly connect students and educators in this way. Thus, the focus was on providing the platform for SGM voices and providing a more direct way to connect their ideas with the teachers tasked with dealing with GSB. The format of semi-structured qualitative interviews further allows educators the opportunity to express any concerns or insights they may have, and allows for a consideration of potential factors of school environments and institutional arrangements that may not otherwise be considered when a program or policy is being designed with standardized or uniform implementation in mind.

## 5.5 Interview Process

All interviews took place between March 2015 and April 2017. Student and educator interviews lasted an hour (on average). No participants refused to participate after the interview was initiated, and no participants refused to answer any of the questions.

Student interviews took place in a private university office space, or at a location mutually convenient for both the interviewer and the participant. Overall 26 student interviews were conducted. Interviewing ceased once student accounts began to reflect similar experiences and suggestions for school improvements. Alternative experiences may still emerge from further research that takes a similar approach, but seeks participants from other post-secondary contexts, or by using different recruitment methods. Nonetheless, the emergence of common themes suggested that the data that had been gathered after the 26 interviews was strong enough for analysis and could be used as a starting point to determine if the experiences of academically resilient students reflected what has already been presented in the literature, or if new trends could be identified by shifting the focus to students 'at promise'. Student interviews were also coded for suggestions for improvements which were added to the educator interview schedule, prior to beginning the second phase of research.

The offer was made to conduct the educator interviews at any location that was convenient for the participant, so all educator interviews were conducted in a private

space in the schools where the participants worked. Interviews were conducted with two principals, two teachers, and one school social worker who works primarily with students in the middle school age range. All of the teacher and principal participants were employed at schools that taught students within the middle school range, but also included younger students. This is due to the structure of Ontario schools where often the middle school years are broken up between different school contexts. Both teachers were directly responsible for classes in the middle school grades.

For the educators, recruitment proved to be more limited given the more passive nature of sampling. Nonetheless, interviews were conducted with teachers, principals, and a social worker which is representative of the key educator stakeholder groups responsible for dealing with instances of bullying in schools. Furthermore, as generalizability was not a goal of the study, the small number of participants is still suitable for the current effort to illuminate potential challenges that may still exist within the current educational context. All participants were from the Toronto District School Board, which is one of the most progressive and resource-rich environments when it comes to efforts to integrate diversity. Thus, this research has the potential to highlight how well GSB is understood when such resources are available (but perhaps remain unused as Short's 2017 research suggests), and whether school climates may have an impact on diversity initiatives even within the context of a more progressive school board. In this manner, it can serve as a form of exploratory research that has the potential to illuminate important avenues for future endeavours or school-based needs assessments.

## 5.6 Interview Analysis

Pseudonyms have been used to ensure confidentiality and anonymity of the research participants. All interviews were audio recorded and then transcribed. Interviews with both populations were semi-structured to ensure that similar topics were discussed with all participants in each group, but also to allow for the flexibility so that participants could share their own voice and include information and insights that they felt were relevant.

Student interviews were initially analyzed to organize the suggestions that students had for what improvements could be made to the current school environments. These suggested initiatives were grouped according to common ideas and integrated into the interview schedule for educator participants, prior to the second phase of research. As an example, many students exalted the benefits of an educational focus on diversity and expressed how the sex education curriculum was a step in the right direction for dealing with negative school environments and GSB. Educational interventions, such as the revised Health and Physical Education curriculum, was then presented as one student-suggested intervention mechanism in the later educator interviews. Educator participants were asked to respond to this idea or suggestion. Since educators had experienced the implementation of the revised curriculum over the previous year, probes were included to further inquire about what that experience was like. Other suggestions such as having visible markers that indicate support for diversity or SGM identities, the need for further teacher education and training to better deal with GSB, and the suggestion of earlier school interventions were also key suggestions that were discussed throughout many of the student interviews and were then integrated into the interview schedules for the educator sample.

Again, the intent behind this was to present student suggestions directly to the educators who would be responsible for implementing such initiatives in schools and to allow educators the chance to respond and discuss such ideas in the context of their experiences and school environments. While broader and more conceptual codes and themes were developed for the written analysis that is presented in the next two chapters, the grouped ideas used for the educator interview schedules were more direct explanations of what was discussed by the participants. This was done to ensure that the suggestions given to educators were as close to the ideas and voices of the student participants as possible.

For the written analysis of both student and teacher interviews, the data was read and line by line coding was conducted. The student and educator data were analyzed as separate data sets when it came to coding and the development of analytic themes. Student transcripts were analyzed first, and results were written prior to analyzing the educator interviews. This was a process that commenced while educator interviews were ongoing.

Following the analysis of the student section, educator transcripts were analyzed. In some cases, the themes developed in the educator chapter could be considered a response to the issues illuminated by the students as this was considered a way through which the educator data could be considered a response to the student comments. In other cases, themes were unique to the educator data and reflected commonalities that were independent of the student findings.

Following the suggestions of Charmaz (1996), active codes were sought, and emerging ideas as common elements were discussed in ongoing memo writing to get initial ideas down which could then be refined and further interrogated upon subsequent readings of the transcripts. Initial and subsequent codes were then grouped and conceptualized as broader categories or themes that bridged the experiences of participants but accounted for both the similarities and differences between participant experiences in each of the respective samples.

Quotes have been integrated to support the categorization of themes. Minor changes were made to quotes to adjust for spelling issues and allow for the proper grammatical integration of the participant's voice into the analysis. Additionally, [...] has been used to connect similar ideas within a participant's account that were discussed separately and [ ] has been used to delineate where information was altered to remove potentially identifying information or to clarify the subject's statement. Quite a few quotes were included in the results sections. The number and length of the included quotes is such because as stated above, the intention behind the research project was to provide the platform, rather than the voice, through which the experiences of participants can be shared.

## 5.7 A Note on Reflexivity

This dissertation is rooted in an understanding of power differences and an effort to challenge the dominant normative privilege of heterosexuality and cis-genderism. Because of the critical nature of this project and the intention of having this research inform attempts to improve school environments, an understanding of the positionality of the researcher becomes increasingly important. My own lived experiences have shaped



the topic undertaken, the choice of using qualitative interviews, and the epistemological, theoretical, and policy or intervention-based nature of the research project. From start to finish, it was important to self-reflect not only on the influence of positionality over the research, but also over interactions between myself and the participants. Such positionality is also important to acknowledge and articulate for those who are reading this dissertation so as to provide a better understanding of the constructed ideas that are articulated here and how they have potentially been swayed or influenced by this positionality.

That I currently identify as a cis-gendered heterosexual female is probably the most prevalent factor that shapes my relationship to this research topic and the student participants in particular. In many ways, this identity situates me as an outsider (Griffith, 1998) in relation to the research topic and student sample, and as someone that is often more privileged than SGM individuals targeted by GSB. To explain further, Griffith (1998) contrasts the idea of an insider, or “someone whose biography (gender, race, class, sexual orientation and so on) gives her [sic] a lived familiarity with the group being researched” (p. 362), with the notion of an outsider, or someone who does not have that intimate knowledge of the research group. While gender and sexuality are important classifications that situate myself in a privileged position relative to my student participants, I would not say that these identity markers are the only relevant aspects of my identity that should determine my relationship to the research or an insider/outsider position. Furthermore, I attempted to mitigate any effect since at no point in the interview process did I disclose my identity to participants.

It was suggested earlier that the commonality of the insult (Eribon, 2004) provides a common experience that could transcend other aspects of identity and supports the inclusion of male and female participants, along with heterosexual or homosexual participants (among other identity categorizations). Thus, having personally experienced bullying based on my gender and/or perceived sexual orientation, my similarities with the student participants no longer ring true of an exclusively outsider position relative to the entire student sample. At the same time, I do not intend to represent myself as having experienced the same level or type of GSB that my participants did. Ultimately, this

insider/outsider dichotomy is somewhat problematic when it comes to classifying myself in relation to my research participants and perhaps should better be understood as a relative distinction subject to different comparisons.

Levy (2013) supports this problematizing of the dichotomy through arguing that researchers are rarely insiders or outsiders in a truly dichotomous sense. Instead, the insider or outsider distinction often rests on an implicit and oversimplified assumption of homogeneity within the population of interest. Such homogenization is in stark opposition to the notion of intersectionality (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1989) which recognizes the diversity within groups based on axes of social inequalities or factors of oppression. Thus, while I am in some ways similar to or different from the participants in this study, the classification as absolute insider or outsider is flawed. Nonetheless, choosing a research method that better allows participants to speak for themselves and reflecting on my positionality, is my attempt to overcome any negative effects of this insider/outsider status.

One could also consider the benefit of this relative insider/outsider positionality. Just like the advantages of retrospective interviews and the idea that it is harder to glean a clear picture of what is going on when deeply involved in a situation, I believe that my experiences have provided a level of personal investment in this topic, while at the same time the differences between my experiences and those of the participants allows me a certain level of emotional distance. This distance can be advantageous in that it allows me the opportunity to see certain commonalities that participants themselves might not be able to articulate or may simply assume based on generalizing from their own experiences.

Lastly, I consider myself to be an ally, or someone who makes an active commitment to stand with SGM groups that have historically been marginalized, and to seek out social justice through my personal and academic work. This is probably the personal characteristic that has most strongly influenced this research as it helps explain my intent of wanting to conduct research with the goal of making things better for all students (given the wide-ranging effects of GSB), and in particular for SGM students. I also hold

the belief that while I may be a relative outsider in many respects, it should not be left solely to insiders or individuals who have been marginalized to challenge the systems that lead to and maintain their oppression. In this manner, I believe it is my responsibility to use the privileges that I have been afforded along with the platform and access that I do have, not to speak for those who have been oppressed, but rather to assist where possible in helping to share the stories of oppression and the ongoing challenges that SGM individuals face.

## 5.8 Presentation of Research Findings

The research findings are discussed below in separate chapters pertaining first to student experiences and then educator perspectives. Participant profiles have been provided for each section. In each of the following two chapters the data is organized by focusing first on experiences with bullying and GSB, and then exploring intervention issues and ideas for further improvements. This organization is also in line with the main research questions that were given for both sample groups. While connections have been made to the existing bullying literature in each of the findings chapters, the subsequent discussion chapter is an attempt to provide a larger overview of the findings that makes connections between both sections and highlights key critiques and insights that can be gleaned from this research project.

## Chapter 6

### 6 Findings I: Student Perspectives

#### 6.1 Participant Profile and Identification

The following table outlines the identity information for the participants in the student group (if stated during the interview). Notations have also been made if the participant disclosed the time at which they came out or identified as such, or whether any other identity was initially disclosed (i.e. some individuals came out to themselves and/or others as bisexual prior to identifying as homosexual).

**Table 1: Student Participant Identification**

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Identity Information</b>
Allison	Identified as bisexual in high school; came out to peers in high school; later in the interview they identified as pansexual
Amanda	Identified as a lesbian; came out to family in high school; came out to peers while in post-secondary
Andrew	Identified as gay; came out to a few close friends in high school; stated that with those few exceptions they were not out while in high school
Audrey	Identified as a straight female
Brad	<i>Did not identify during the interview</i>
Charlie	Identified as a gay male; came out to peers in grade ten
Charlotte	Indicated that they do not identify; came out after high school
Danielle	<i>Did not identify during the interview</i>
Emily	Self-identified as bisexual at age 15; came out to close friends in high school
Heather	Identified as a queer woman; disclosed being mostly attracted to women
Holly	<i>Did not identify during the interview</i>
Jennifer	Identified as queer and gay; started to self-identify in elementary school; came out to friends in grade eleven
Kate	<i>Did not identify during the interview</i>
Kim	<i>Did not identify during the interview</i>
Lauren	Identified as lesbian; self-identified at the start of high school; first came out as bisexual since it seemed to be slightly more ‘acceptable’; started to come out to close friends in grade ten; waited to come out to family until they

	were ready to enter a relationship
Leslie	Indicated that they do not identify because they do not like to label themselves; came out at the end of high school to family
Mike	<i>Did not identify during the interview</i>
Nathan	Identified as gay; always knew they were gay; waited until post-secondary to come out
Patrick	Identified as being gay; came out to parents and a few friends during high school; first day of post-secondary was the first time that they came out to all peers
Peter	Identified as being gay; came out during high school
Rebecca	<i>Did not identify during the interview</i>
Robert	Identified as a gay man; came out as bisexual first at age 22
Samantha	Identified as gay cis-gendered female; came out to peers late in high school
Sarah	<i>Did not identify during the interview</i>
Taylor	Identified as gender queer and as bisexual
Veronica	Self-identified as lesbian in first year post-secondary; identified as female

Even though the majority of participants identified during the course of the interviews, the omission of gender or sexual identity is also an important consideration. For instance, eight participants omitted a disclosure of their sexual orientation or sexual identity. Additionally, only Audrey, Charlie, Heather, Veronica, Samantha and Robert made clear statements or declarations regarding their gender identity. The remainder of the participants did not indicate how they identified in terms of their gender.

It is important to consider how participants may not have wanted to disclose their identity during the interview. Alternatively, some may not have felt it necessary to make such a disclosure. This can be connected to the privilege that heterosexuals and cis-gendered individuals hold in society whereby their identities are usually not questioned, unless one begins to deviate from the norm. Not identifying (based on the feeling of not needing to), can therefore be seen as something that helps to reinforce the inherent privileging of cis-gendered heterosexual individuals as it reinforces the reliance on assumptions of normativity. With that said, participants that did not disclose their identity should not be assumed to be heterosexual and cis-gendered based on their non-disclosure alone.

In an effort to respect the identities of participants, only those labels that were self-imposed during the course of the interview process were reflected in the above chart. Additionally, the classification of participants into male and female binary categories through the use of gendered pronouns has been avoided in the reporting of results. Thus, the neutral pronouns ‘they’, ‘their’, ‘themselves’, and ‘themselves’ will be used in lieu of gendered terms such as ‘his’ and ‘her’.

Sherlock (2016) has noted that the use of pronouns in social science research is often assumed, and participants are not usually asked explicitly about their preferred pronoun. This again reinforces the normalcy of making assumptions regarding one’s identity, and the dominance of the binary use of male and female categorizations based on such assumptions. Yet, “the use of the correct pronoun (he, she, they) for individuals is one of the key ways we can indicate respect or disrespect towards a person’s gender identity” (Sherlock, 2016, p. 202). The intent behind this was to respect the possibility that an individual may not wish to be identified using the pronoun assumed based on their appearance or given the gendered connotation of their name. This choice was measured against the possibility that gender-neutral pronouns could alternatively be seen as disrespectful towards individuals who fight for the use of certain pronouns over others (for example, a transgender individual who seeks to be identified with certain pronouns as part of their gender transition). Since so few participants explicitly stated their gender identity on their own accord, and no participants identified as transgender or requested the use of particular pronouns, the neutral reference can therefore be considered less as a negative de-gendering of the participants, and more as an effort to avoid making unnecessary inferences/assumptions about one’s gender identity.

Participant pseudonyms were created to identify each individual and to account for confidentiality and anonymity. The names assigned were based on the gendered connotations of the participant’s given name (i.e. if a participant had a name that would typically be associated with the female gender, then a similarly female gendered name was assigned). As Taylor identified as gender queer, an attempt was made to respect their identity by assigning a name that could also be considered gender queer in that it is not overtly feminine or masculine.

While this naming does represent a gendering of the participants that seems counterintuitive to the intentional use of gender-neutral pronouns, it was done in an attempt avoid the de-humanizing of individuals that could have occurred if numbers had been used to distinguish participants, rather than pseudonyms. Admittedly this is an imperfect solution to navigating between wanting to respect the gendered nature of individuals while working to avoid assumptive gendering. A solution for future research would be to allow participants the option to select their own pseudonyms and pronouns.

## 6.2 Overview of Findings

Findings from the student interviews have been divided into four main sections. The first section focuses on answering the first research question and attempts to illustrate what student experiences with GSB entailed. The focus of the second section highlights some of the common consequences that students reported from experiencing this form of bullying. The third section looks to address the second research question by highlighting the assets and resources that appeared to enable to participants to be resilient and mitigate the negative experiences that they had. The final section looks at the barriers to dealing with GSB that the students described and identifies some of the ways that the students found educational environments to be lacking or otherwise failing to support them. Additionally, this section highlights key areas for educational improvements that should help to facilitate the development of resilience in students who may still encounter and need to contend with GSB, and thus addresses the final research question for this group of participants.

## 6.3 Student Experiences with GSB

When reflecting on the commonalities between student interviews and their discussions of GSB, five main themes stood out. These themes are explained below to describe the way that students explained their bullying experiences, the kinds of bullying they experienced, as well as the apparent key purpose and effect of bullying.

### 6.3.1 Not the Typical Kind of Bullying

When interviewed, students often first expressed that they were not subject to physical forms of bullying. Only Samantha and Charlie described experiencing physical altercations. Samantha recounted their experience and stated, “I had a water bottle thrown at my head once, when I was walking hand in hand with a girl”. Charlie also recounted a more violent encounter during elementary school when some boys beat and hit them with sticks. Charlie admitted they were unsure of whether this had anything to do with their gender or sexuality though. Both Samantha and Charlie’s physical altercations were singular instances, in that the physical targeting was not repeated and no other references to physical manifestations were mentioned throughout the remainder of their interviews.

In contrast, when asked to describe what their experiences were like, many participants often premised the discussion of their experiences with a clear distinction between a physical understanding of bullying and what they had been subjected to. For instance, Emily stated that:

...[bullying] wasn’t a huge thing at our school, at least not in the typical sense [...] sort of what would happen would be kind of like, my experience [...] no one was getting you know, beaten or any of that...

Patrick and Jennifer also made clear distinctions between their experiences and physical manifestations.

**Patrick:** “...I’ve never been one to get really bullied, like physically bullied, everything was more for me, um, verbal...”

**Jennifer:** “There was nothing like, nothing violent happened, nothing that caused me to like, miss class or lose marks...”

Such juxtapositions appear to insinuate that the expectation would have been for participants to experience physical forms of bullying. Thus, participants appeared to feel a need to clarify that this was not the case, and further explain that their bullying experiences were different from what might otherwise have been expected. This separation appears to reinforce the idea that physical bullying is the dominant or normative standard to which other experiences should be compared.



Severity was another distinction that was made by participants who contrasted their experiences with other more severe examples. This seemed to involve another somewhat implicit assumption that bullying should be severe. As an example, Robert claimed that they had never “...received like a lot of like, really vicious harassment, but more like low level...” forms of negative peer interactions. Furthermore, Leslie explained that they were “...never badly bullied or anything, but...it was just comments like that kind of get to you after a while because you hear them a lot, from a lot of different people”. Such distinctions between what the participants experienced and their understanding of more serious forms of bullying could be tied to a (mis)perception of physical bullying as being a more serious or severe form as well.

Such an outlook is misguided and may lead to an underestimation of the negative effects of verbal and social forms of bullying. This contrast may also have implications for how students themselves come to understand what bullying is, and whether or not it is serious enough to warrant reporting or intervention. For example, Heather explained that:

In terms of the bullying, my teachers didn't know because I never told them, so nothing really happened there.

[...]

It just never came up to me that that was something I could tell them, I just thought that

[...]

it was like a more minor thing, even though it was making me feel really bad.

Emily also explained that they tend to avoid labelling their experiences as bullying when talking to others in the queer community since “...I know how terrible a lot of other people's experiences have been, and I, I can feel that people can get a bit upset when I say, ‘Oh yeah, I had a hard time with it too’ because they know it's nothing compared to what most peoples' were...”. Thus, the common trend for participants was to deny the severity of their consequences against physical forms and the experiences of others. Such minimization, especially if it occurs at the time of the bullying, could have implications for whether or not individuals report their bullying to teachers. If their perception is that

their experiences are not severe, or at least not severe enough to warrant reporting, then educators are denied the opportunity to interrupt such peer interactions, unless of course they had observed the behaviour themselves. Regardless of this minimization, the interviews did reveal how these ‘less severe’ experiences still affected the participants and caused harm or emotional distress.

Only Patrick appeared to challenge this downplaying or minimizing tendency. In their interview, Patrick indicated that although their experiences did not include physical forms of bullying (likely because they had the size and strength to defend themselves against such), the verbal bullying they were exposed to was almost worse than if they had been ‘beat up’. Patrick explained:

I almost think it’s worse because at least if you get beat up, like, you don’t hate yourself after, whereas years of just getting told that you’re...getting made fun of because you’re you, I guess, um, that really does kind of make you hate yourself and that’s much more dangerous.

Patrick’s understanding of the severity of their bullying experiences is also reflective of the more severe repercussions associated with GSB as a specific form of bullying (e.g. Pilkington & D’Augelli, 1995) and again reinforces the idea that GSB may contribute to issues around self-actualization and identity (Leonardi & Saenz, 2014; Short, 2017).

Overall, based on the juxtapositions that were given and implied in the participant accounts to articulate how their experiences were non-verbal and not vicious, the participants appeared to make a distinction between what they had gone through and what they conceptualized as bullying ‘in the typical sense’. The common comparison to physical bullying also appears to support the notion of a narrower conceptualization where physical forms are typified as the archetype of bullying behaviour in public discourse, despite the broader array of behaviours classified as bullying in policy (e.g. Ontario Ministry of Education, 2018b) and academic definitions (e.g. Olweus, 1993).

This reinforces the necessity of taking into account how definitions of bullying may differ when looking at public and student conceptualizations (Arora, 1996; Land, 2003). If students do not classify their experiences as bullying ‘in the typical sense’ or bullying that is severe enough to warrant reporting, this may have implications for schools or other

research that attempts to gauge the extent of bullying that occurs, and certainly would have implications for the likelihood of intervention in those specific bullying situations. In coming forward to participate in this study, the participants nonetheless made the claim that their experiences should still be labelled as bullying, regardless of the form or level of severity. Whether or not this conceptualization was the result of hindsight, or their apparent willingness to contribute to research efforts versus reporting efforts, in their participation and throughout their interviews, the students reinforced the idea that their non-physical forms also have negative consequences.

### 6.3.2 Sticks and Stones, and Words Do Hurt

Although physical experiences of bullying were largely absent from participant accounts, verbal bullying was explained as being a common experience. This verbal targeting frequently involved the use of homophobic epithets, and participants often described this beginning prior to understanding what the labels they were targeted with meant:

**Peter:** “I was called gay before I ever even knew what gay was”

**Lauren:** “I...don’t think I knew like, terminology when I was really little. I didn’t know what the hell a lesbian was, I don’t think most six and seven year olds do. But I do remember it being used occasionally as an insult.

[...]

I don’t know what the hell it was, but I remember thinking I don’t want to be a lesbian [laughs]. Cause obviously it’s associated with some sort of negativity, so ew, so obviously nobody wants to be associated with something gross or disgusting, so obviously I don’t want to be a lesbian. And I guess gay was used too, but not as...I guess gay was used more frequently than lesbian...but, but by guys, not girls. Not that I knew what either of them meant cause I was like, nine or ten, but...”

Occasionally, such labelling occurred through written forms, but nonetheless still had negative implications for the participants and their sense of safety and self-understanding. For example, Patrick was labelled a ‘faggot’ through the use of locker graffiti in addition to being verbally targeted as gay:

Like, I always knew that I was different but I didn’t know that I was gay. I knew that everybody called me gay, and like in my head, like, I was like

‘If I grow up and I’m gay, like I would, I don’t want that at all. Like I would rather anything else’.

Samantha explained how they had been the recipient of the lesbian label: “And then one time there was a note on my locker that said, like, it was simply ‘I know you’re a lesbian’, and I didn’t even know that yet. So, things like that were true, and strangely menacing...”.

Regardless of not having a complete understanding of the labels, the implication was that such terms were being used as an insult. In Heather’s case, this negative association appeared to persist even through to the time of the interview:

...I didn’t know what that meant and like, specifically, but I was, from the way he said it, I got the, I got the hint that it wasn’t like, a positive word or like, you know. I knew that he wasn’t using it in a positive context, but like, I think that, I’m really, from that point I kind of always associated that word with like negative things, which is why even now... um, so I’m like a queer woman and um basically I am mostly attracted to women, or like, people that have a gender similar to me, but um, but I still can’t like, even...every time I see and hear the word lesbian, I always like, kind of, have a kind of like mini panic, because you know, like, the very first times I heard that word it wasn’t in a positive context.

As will be discussed in the last section of this chapter (Structural Barriers to Interrupting GSB and Fostering Resilience), there was an absence of positive discussions of SGM identities within the school context. Likely because of the lack of positive use of such terms, as the quotes suggest, labels such as ‘gay’ or a ‘lesbian’ came to be associated with a negative interpretation which was then internalized by the participants. Interestingly, while terms such as ‘fag’, ‘queer’ and ‘dyke’ have often been given as common labels used in instances of bullying (Khayatt, 1994; Pascoe, 2007; Smith & Smith, 1998) and were occasionally reported by participants in this study, the use of ‘gay’ and ‘lesbian’ as insults were also, and more frequently, reported by students. Although this suggests that there may have been a shift in the language used in GSB over time, the negative interpretation and effect appears to remain similar.

### 6.3.3 Put Down and Left Out

In addition to the direct verbal forms of bullying discussed by participants, indirect and relational bullying was also revealed during the interviews, albeit less often than the verbal forms. Charlie's interview provided an example of this:

...it was often said behind my back and things that I didn't hear, but there was oftentimes when I would like definitely notice them jeering at me or something like that, but like from afar.

Andrew also described instances where they felt as though they were different, and this difference contributed to their exclusion from social groups: "I wouldn't say people like were malicious, but like I did feel excluded a couple times, um, the typical like, who gets invited to birthday parties, that kind of thing". This exclusion was felt again when Andrew made the transition to high school: "I felt at times kind of like left in the dust when people would be making new friends and I was kind of...I wasn't a loner by any means, but um, I wasn't as confident to make new friends I'd say".

Coming out appeared as a key factor that for some participants seemed to increase this form of social exclusion and bullying. Lauren and Peter both articulated the ways that social exclusion and rumours appeared to worsen once students came out:

**Lauren:** "I got kind of a mixed reaction, kind of like a...I'm uncomfortable, but it's not wrong, it was kind of an uncomfortable response from a friend, it was kind of like, 'I don't really know if I want to have sleepovers with you anymore, or play with you anymore, or like hang out with you anymore', 'it's nothing wrong with it, I'm just basically uncomfortable type thing'..."

**Peter:** "...There was one guy, he's heavily closeted and him and I were talking for a little bit and then um, he started getting nervous I think, so he started telling everybody that I was like hitting on him and stuff and, like he spread that around the school that I was like trying to like latch on to him or something, but like, it was very much mutual like, he was gay but he was closeted.

Interviewer: What do you think he was getting nervous about?

Peter: That people would find out he's gay."

When such findings are connected to the theoretical explanations of GSB outlined earlier, possible reasons become clearer. It is likely that coming out reinforces the negative positioning of an individual relative to heteronormative ideals, thus making it easier for peers to target someone in an attempt to gain status power over the ‘out’ individuals. Alternatively, coming out may reinforce the need for others to distance themselves to avoid being associated with individuals who willingly accept such a deviant label and lower social status. Rumours and avoidance can then be considered mechanisms of disassociation.

Although examples of rumours, talking behind one’s back, and social exclusion were hard for participants to know the extent of, they nonetheless believed that this had been going on. This finding brings to the fore the importance of perception. For example, the actual occurrence and perpetration of bullying can be distinguished from the perception of experiencing relational bullying. Because of this, harms may be derived from the mere perception of this form, independent of the actual occurrence. As such, there would be implications for the reporting of bullying that is based in more obscure actions such as exclusion as it may be harder to detect, and further, if it manifests more in perceptions rather than observable and identifiable instances that educators would be able to intervene with.

#### 6.3.4 Policing Gender and Sexuality

Student interviews also revealed that the reason that they were targeted often had to do with being perceived as different by their peers, a finding that aligns with Thornberg’s (2015) research. Notions of difference were quite common throughout the interviews. For example:

**Samantha:** “Well I just feel like anyone who is different is targeted.”

**Andrew:** “...it was just like the sense that others perceived me differently and like, knowing that I was perceived different.”

Other factors or signs of difference may have also increased one’s likelihood of being targeted. For example, Peter explained that they may have also been singled out because they were a heavier weight than their peers, and Nathan explained that being an

immigrant and learning English as a second language may have factored into being targeted. Nonetheless, the main reason for targeting was due to being different based on not adhering to particular gender norms and deviating from the expectation of compulsory heterosexuality. The main message conveyed through such targeting was explained best by Patrick who stated: “it’s wrong to be different”.

The policing of gender difference through bullying occurred as early as elementary school for some participants. Taylor’s experience provides a good example of such gender policing:

Um, I’ve always been very ah...never followed gender roles as a kid and that’s followed into my adulthood so I identify as gender queer, um, and that was very noticeable for the students around me when I was in elementary school.

[...]

Um, I cut my hair pretty short so I um actually kind of looked more like a boy sometimes and depending on how I was feeling that day, if I was feeling more feminine, I would dress more feminine, if I was feeling more masculine I’d dress more masculine, um, so I’d always get a lot of weird looks whenever I was having my more masculine days, especially when I was trying to use the bathroom, I’d have a lot of girls look at me, and kind of ask ‘are you sure you’re in the right bathroom?’ type of thing

[...]

Mostly because I was different and I think a big part of it too was that, you know, obviously the girls had crushes on all the boys and I think that they were just jealous that I was hanging out with the boys instead of standing around with them talking about them

[...]

Um, so they would always comment you know like ‘why are you always hanging out with the boys?’, um, they even said you know ‘well you’ll never be a real boy’, and I remember even when I was in grade two saying specifically like, ‘I don’t care, like sometimes I want to be a boy, I don’t care if I hang out with the boys, sometimes I want to just for a few days of the week or something’, um, and then they would call me ‘Jacob’ because I had a sweatshirt that had ‘Jacob’ on it and then during one of our encounters I was wearing that so they started calling me Jacob and would always tease me and so that was one of the big ones growing up.

This quote reflects the idea that understandings of gender are often entrenched in the sex binary between male and female. Biology thus seems to be paramount in perceptions that determine who is able to be a 'real boy', and such statements also illustrate the perception that such ideal forms exist. To assume that there is a 'real boy' reifies the notion that there is a singular conception of masculinity, and those who do not measure up to that standard would thus be less than.

Not measuring up to this expected form of masculinity was suggested in Nathan's interview:

...when I wanted to be with the boys, I was constantly highlighted how more feminine I was. But then when I was with the girls, it was like, 'oh well you're with the girls all the time', so no matter which group I was in, I was constantly picked on for something. It's like, or the guys for example, I would want to try to like hockey or play sports, but they were like 'no, you really don't like that', you know, 'you're more...you don't actually like that'. And I'm like, 'okay', so I would try to be with the girls, but then they would be like 'oh, why aren't you doing boy things', 'that's not what you're supposed to be doing', so it was almost like polar opposite ends that were constantly being pulled, or targeted for me. When I wanted to do what they wanted to do, I was still being criticized.

Robert also expressed how not adhering to gendered expectations in high school was a reason for being understood as different and targeted by bullies, and this difference was made all the more evident in relation to the lack of diversity in their school:

...I attended high school in a small town um, very not, very little diversity, all the guys were like into hockey and listened to certain types of music, and I, I don't know, I...you know, listened to Mariah Carey and stuff like that and so, you know, I was a little different from the other guys so I think I was maybe, maybe targeted a bit like that, I stood out a bit.

Given that differences would be exacerbated in schools with less diversity, this idea reinforces the notion that school contexts may also affect the extent of GSB. Schools with less diversity, or where gender norms are more pronounced, may be more likely to encourage the perpetration of GSB, merely by fostering a context where such difference is most likely to stand out.



The policing of gender differences also tended to be associated with bullying that was based on one's perceived sexual orientation. For example, not adhering to gender norms by associating with female students more than male students, not wanting to discuss female students, and even talking a different way or having different interests was often taken as signifying one's homosexuality. Charlie and Patrick provided two good examples of this idea:

**Charlie:** "People would interpret me as queer and as gay, because of my inflection, because of my mannerisms and stuff

[...]

the mannerisms, I talk with my hands, and that's apparently a gay thing, to talk with your hands. Um, I hung out with girls mostly, I never really hung out with guys, I was always very much with the girls, and so people were like 'well, he's with the girls, he must want to be a girl, he must be gay because gay guys don't want to hang out with straight guys' or something like that, um, and I was also very quiet and shy and artistic and so that's obviously markers of a gay man [laughs]"

**Patrick:** "I didn't like talking about girls in class at the back of the class. I didn't enjoy the more explicit talking about girls at the lunch table and stuff like that

[...]

I really didn't like any of that and I mean that makes you different and sooner or later people are going to go 'oh, he doesn't like any of this' and they, people are smart, they put two and two together..."

Thus, deviations from gender norms appeared to simultaneously negate the possibility of opposite-sex attraction and resulted in perceptions about one's sexual orientation. In being labelled for their actions, appearance, or mannerisms, a negative identity thus appears to be imposed upon students (again, often prior to the students themselves either knowing the meaning of the label or identifying as such). In some ways this appears to mirror the emergence of the homosexual, in that there is a homosexual being or identity that has been conceptualized that stands apart from homosexual acts (Foucault, 1990; Somerville, 1994). As described by participants, this identity was based solely on the

connections between gender performativity and sexual orientation that are often assumed under a heteronormative ideology.

Such bullying also appeared to not only reinforce notions of right and wrong behaviour and identities, it also appeared to encourage students to adhere to the dominant expectations by altering their behaviour or hiding who they were. Although this will be discussed more in the second section which focuses on the consequences of GSB, it is worth noting how this notion of control was expressed by Samantha:

...when you can get away with saying something and you see that it keeps someone in check, and it also like, reinforces...it is kind of like recuperator politics. By putting someone else down, like, it really does like reinforce your like, heterosexuality. Do you know what I mean? It makes you feel better, and whether that has something to do with their own doubts in their own life, or just living in a climate where people don't necessarily feel extremely accepting of 'deviant sexualities'

[...]

So I mean like, you get a certain sense of power over someone when you get to be like, when you get to kind of dictate their daily actions. When I start correcting things I do to kind of make you more comfortable, then you've like won, when you've got me changing my behaviours.

Such pressures to fit in and not appear different were both the direct result of experiencing GSB, but also appeared to be the result of witnessing the experiences of others.

### 6.3.5 A Different Sort of Bystander Effect

Much of the bullying literature focuses on the notion of bystanders as those individuals who bear witness to bullying, and who should ultimately be encouraged to intervene or alert educators to the ongoing bullying. In many cases, the participants of this study appeared to be the bystanders who bore witness to the GSB experiences of other students. In addition to the quotes presented above that show the juxtapositions that students made in describing their experiences, a few other quotes can be presented to highlight how prevalent this idea of witnessing the targeting of others was. For example, Heather stated:

...there was this other kid in my elementary, like, we were in elementary and middle school together, and his was like pretty bad because they would just like make fun of him for being gay and like pick on him. Like, um, kind of exclude him and like, it was pretty awful.

Samantha explained:

...I had the least worst of it, like one time someone pelted a girl in the change room with wet paper towels and people were like 'get out of here dyke bitch' and 'you're just staring at all of us', um, so I mean like relative to that by juxtaposition, it was not that bad.

Thus, as well as helping to shape an understanding of one's own experiences, witnessing GSB against other students also seemed to serve as a warning of what might happen if the gender or sexual deviance of closeted participants were to be discovered, or if they did something to make themselves more of a target than they already were. Lauren's explanation of their decision to come out best illustrates this idea:

I thought like, you know what, I don't know anybody else in my entire school who identifies as lesbian, I know a few gay guys here and there but they were really picked on, I don't know if I'll get the same reaction or not, but I'm like, I've already experienced a lot of really negative comments from friends, it's just not worth it.

When asked to elaborate on the experiences of 'the gay guys who were really picked on', Lauren recounted:

I remember vividly, in grade ten, I definitely knew, I knew that I liked girls at this point. Wasn't sure if I was quite, lesbian or bi, but either way, I deliberately remember being on social media and seeing people write on this guy's wall sometimes, being like 'you're a fag', or like, you know what, negative, really negative things like that, or just people excluding him in general. He would go to school and be, he had things written all over his locker once, just like really ridiculous things you would see in like, High School Musical, like ridiculous, different...just ridiculous portrayals of what high school might be like for some people. I feel like, kind of like that. So, like, things that you don't actually think would happen, but do end up happening. People would definitely talk about him, like about the weird gay guy

[...]

it was definitely a negative, a really negative experience for him, and I just feel really bad looking back at it, being like I look at that situation at the

time, nobody wanted to be in that guy's shoes cause a lot of the guys were like, 'this guy's weird, he's more feminine than us', they were all uncomfortable, somehow they thought like, he was questioning their masculinity by like, maybe being attracted to guys or what, but either way it was just a really negative social response.

Although the negative implications of this bystander positioning will be elaborated on in the next section, in highlighting such experiences it becomes apparent that the experiences of others thus had an indirect impact on the participants. This resulted in the perpetuation of both fear and the self-monitoring of behaviour so individuals would not become targets themselves.

Currently, the effect of having to bear witness to such experiences may or may not be included in definitions of bullying, depending on the extent to which the direction of action is taken into consideration. If not bullying, such experiences could otherwise be classified as instances of harassment (see Meyer, 2014). Based on the Ministry's definition, actions that create negative environments for other students are considered to be bullying, as long as those actions are also based on an imbalance of power (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2018b).

Regardless of the context and definitions used, given the frequent inclusion of such comparisons in interviews that were focused on students and their self-defined bullying experiences, it is important to consider that this indirect exposure to bullying appears to be considered bullying in and of itself by those who are forced to bear witness. Given that students reported experiencing negative effects from the targeting of others and also came to understand or evaluate their own bullying experiences in relation to those that others experienced, it appears as though the individuals also perceived themselves to be indirect targets of the GSB they witnessed. Indirect bullying in this sense has less to do with spreading rumours and social exclusion (Rivers & Smith, 1994), and more aptly describes a form of secondary targeting as a by-product of the initial instance of GSB.

Thus, in reflecting on the experiences of GSB that were captured in the interviews, it is possible to see how the participants were targeted in a variety of ways, although mostly through non-physical manifestations of GSB. The verbal and exclusionary experiences

that were discussed by participants do fall under the current scope of bullying definitions commonly adopted by the academic community and the Ontario Ministry of Education, although the participants appeared to hold on to a typical notion of bullying that would involve physical forms. Furthermore, negative repercussions from witnessing the targeting of others emerged as a common theme that also reinforces the need to consider how widespread the negative effects of bullying are, and how even if not directly targeted, bullying can contribute to a hostile school climate (Espelage et al., 2015).

Participants explained being targeted based on their perceived differences, a finding that has been supported elsewhere in the literature (Plummer, 2001; Thornberg, 2015; Walton & Niblett, 2013). In targeting difference, such bullying behaviours that were described also served to reinforce notions of appropriate gendered behaviour and heterosexuality, and frequently involved the use of homophobic slurs as insults. Such verbal reinforcement of heteronormativity was an early occurrence for participants, many of whom did not fully comprehend the meaning of such terms prior to hearing them in a negative context. The absence of positive references to gay and lesbian thus meant that the dominant interpretation of the terms for many of the students in the study was a negative one, and as discussed later in this chapter, one that largely went unchallenged by the heteronormative curriculum and classroom discussions the students were exposed to. Overall, this section has thus shown not only a need for schools to address instances of GSB, but also to address the heteronormative context that reaffirms notions of difference as deviant and as something that could be considered acceptable to police.

## 6.4 Consequences of GSB

This second section highlights several of the common consequences that students raised as a result of having to deal with GSB either directly or indirectly in their school contexts. Such consequences have been organized into five key themes.

### 6.4.1 Omnipresent Threat of Becoming a Target

Most aligned with the previous idea of being a bystander to the bullying experiences of others, the student interviews showcased how their school experiences were often fraught with not only the consequences of being targeted, but also fears about becoming a target

of GSB. Bearing witness of the experiences of others meant that individuals were often concerned about whether or not they would be ‘found out’ and then targeted themselves. Lauren’s interview provided one of the more cohesive examples of this, and the perceived consequences if their non-heterosexual identity were to be discovered:

It was kind of like this overshadowed cloud. It always kind of was, cause it was like, I wonder if someone else is going to find out, I wonder if...I just wonder in general if somebody else is going to find out and if they’re going to tell everybody and if I’m going to be bullied, am I going to have to change high schools?

[...]

I don’t know anybody else in my entire school who identifies as lesbian, I know a few gay guys here and there but they were really picked on, I don’t know if I’ll get the same reaction or not, but I’m like, I’ve already experienced a lot of really negative comments from friends, it’s just not worth it.

As well, Allison explained how the exposure to the experiences of others and the widespread use of homophobic epithets affected them. Although not directed towards Allison herself, such experiences:

...start[ed] a very suppressive environment from an early age. Because I was definitely way too afraid to um, tell anybody about anything just because I heard how negative everything was around me. And it was like, ‘well if I actually am the fag that they’re all yelling about, then that’s going to get a lot worse for me’...

Another element of this theme involves a challenge to the idea that bullying is something that is repeated over time, in that participants in this study rarely identified a single person or group that was responsible for perpetrating GSB. Charlie and Samantha were the only individuals who referenced repetition by a particular individual or group. Charlie’s experiences were mainly the result of a “gaggle of straight boys”, and Samantha highlighted one particular individual who was problematic. Samantha also explained, however, that their experiences involved a range of perpetrators, rather than just a select few that kept engaging in bullying: “It was coming from all angles and like people weren’t standing up to it”.

Thus, instead of being fearful of a particular group or individual, it appeared as though the threat of being targeted could come from anywhere. Such a threat would thus necessitate that individuals constantly monitor their behaviour and remain vigilant about who might be a likely perpetrator. This notion appears to be closely tied to the idea of minority stress as conceptualized by Meyer (1995; 2003) in that minority individuals learn to expect and anticipate negative regard from others in society and must remain vigilant to deal with this. Minority stress may then result from being in a constant state of preparedness to face GSB, or from the vigilance required in the concealment of identity when one attempts to pass as heterosexual or as gender conforming (e.g. Kelleher, 2009; Rood et al., 2016).

#### 6.4.2 Forced to Hide

As a result of the constant threat of being targeted, it appears as though many participants in this study appeared to ‘remain closeted’ and hide their identities, or their non-conformity. As shown from the above quotes and the participant identity chart, many chose to remain closeted, even after coming out to themselves.

Although Patrick was not ‘out’ while in high school, their experience was so negative that Patrick believed that it was likely the impetus to encourage others to remain closeted themselves:

Like statistically there had to be at least a couple more gay, lesbian, bisexual people at the school, there had to be right? I forget what the actual statistic is, but it’s not like, it’s not nothing. Um, but if they, for like, if they were in my grade and they saw what I was going through, I would have kept my mouth shut too, right? I wouldn’t have said anything if I knew, if I knew what it would ah, what it would bring...

Thus, ‘passing’ and remaining closeted in hostile environments often seemed like the most straightforward option. Charlotte, for example, recognized their privilege in being able to ‘pass’, and also explained this was the likely reason that they were able to escape more severe experiences of GSB:

...it was something that I could navigate, being hidden in it as well, so like I could pass as straight, like if I walked in here and just said that I’m

straight you'd believe me, you know what I mean? People just kind of assume heterosexuality so it's easy for me to blend in I guess...

For others, while 'passing' was their chosen option, it did appear to involve a bit more effort than what Charlotte alluded to. Thus, some participants described altering the way they expressed their gender in order to avoid being perceived as different. For example, Andrew referred to their attempts to conform as 'playing the bro act'. In order to play such an act, Andrew explained that they would often "...deepen my voice a little and um, I wouldn't really hold back with like...like, the locker room talk I guess, like 'don't be a pussy', like 'faggot', like that kind of stuff...". Alternatively, Nathan referred to their conforming behaviour as 'catering':

I would do whatever I could to sort of change how I was and cater myself to okay, if I'm obviously different and everyone sees that, what can I do to make myself fit in, and kind of out of the shadows, off the radar.

While remaining in the closet thus appeared as a potential option for some participants, it did not mean that individuals would be able to escape GSB. For example, Patrick was closeted, but was still targeted based on their presumed sexual orientation. Charlie as well was perceived as different given their mannerisms and inflection which would have likely made 'passing' a more difficult endeavour. Furthermore, being able to 'pass' does not preclude someone from the negative effects of having to bear witness to the bullying of other students.

Efforts to 'pass' may also be hindered in different situational contexts. For example, research has suggested that remaining closeted may be more difficult in more cognitively demanding situations (Sylva, Rieger, Linsenmeier & Bailey, 2010). Such findings suggest that efforts to successfully pass may be more unlikely in school contexts when cognitive demands are higher. Furthermore, effort required to self-monitor one's actions and the constant questioning of whether this was being carried out successfully, may be another source of distress and distraction that takes away from one's ability to focus on educational tasks and could potentially impede academic focus and success. This idea was expressed by Patrick who admitted to struggling academically while in high school given their participation in sports and other school activities:



“...grade eleven was my worst year. I almost failed actually, well some of my classes...most of my classes. Um, just you spend all of your time trying to get everyone to accept you, that you don't actually have time to do anything that you're supposed to be doing, like schoolwork or anything like that...”

Patrick believed that focusing on such social activities would help to mask their difference or allow them to fit in with their peers more, but unfortunately this did not happen, and their grades suffered because of this.

Aside from remaining closeted or altering one's behaviour, one slightly different notion of hiding was presented by Lauren. Lauren explained their coming out process, which still involved a form of hiding or conforming:

I started to tell people in high school, probably grade ten, but I got really negative reactions from my friends, so that was an immediate like, 'shit'. But I didn't say I was lesbian, I said I was bisexual because that seems to be like the more acceptable label in terms of, I still like guys, but I also like girls. That was an easier label to kind of pull off and I feel like it's not as uncommon. I feel like a lot of people I've heard of anyway, come out as bisexual before they come out as a lesbian because it is easier, because your parents and your family and your friends are still kind of like, 'well you could like, just find a guy then if you like guys too', so then all of a sudden you're still kind of normal. You're not quite, but just kind of normal. So, I came out as bisexual first.

Thus, even though Lauren was 'out' in a sense, they were not completely willing to disclose their real identity for fear of being targeted and perceived negatively. For Lauren, bisexuality appeared to be a less stigmatized identity that they were willing to adopt. This ranking of stigmatized identities likely has to do with the apparent tie that bisexuality has with heterosexuality, in that bisexual individuals may still engage in opposite sex relationships and thus not appear to violate normative expectations when doing so. In that sense, bisexuality could be perceived as a less deviant identity than homosexuality, which would be a complete refutation of the 'heterosexual ideal'. In this quote Lauren also reinforces the notion of heterosexuality as being 'normal', whereas bisexuality is 'kind of normal'. This leaves homosexuality on the opposite end of the continuum, to be understood as 'abnormal' or fully deviant. While adopting such an identity may give students more freedom and reduce the strain of remaining closeted if it

is not policed as much as a ‘fully deviant’ identity, it nonetheless denies individuals the opportunity to accept their real identity. Furthermore, this option is still a form of ‘catering’ or a sign of being controlled by heteronormative expectations and GSB.

### 6.4.3 Social Isolation

Social isolation not only emerged as a form of bullying that individuals were exposed to, but also appeared to be a consequence of being perceived as different. A quote from Allison best summarizes this idea:

...I actually lost one of my friends the second that we created the GSA. She was a good friend of mine and then no conversation after that...gone, out of my life. I lost a lot of friends for that. Just slowly fading out or hearing that they’re not actually there for me, they’re just...it’s like a two-faced relationship and...yeah. That was the most...that people can lie...will lie to your face for it, or they’ll just leave, or people the second they find it, something changes. You’re never the same as soon as you have some sort of gayness about you, to everyone.

Allison’s quote, along with the earlier quote from Peter (included in the ‘Put Down and Left Out’ section), can be used to demonstrate how this social isolation could be the result of individuals ‘fading out’ and slowly distancing themselves from individuals who have been marked as ‘different’, or it could be more intentional and constitute a form of relational and indirect bullying in and of itself. As research suggests, this social isolation could have implications for the ability to make and sustain friendships (McMahon, et al, 2010; Nansel et al., 2001), although none of the participants seemed to be affected by such long-term consequences, at least from what they revealed in their interviews.

Despite the lack of long-term signs of isolation, short-term isolation was a consequence of being targeted by GSB and having “some sort of gayness about you” (in Allison’s words). In addition to isolation as a negative effect, this also appeared to be a possible defense mechanism as Amanda’s interview suggested:

I ended up being really frustrated with myself, you know, hiding who I was and not being able to express who I truly was, meaning kind of just, I mean, I just always kind of walked throughout the halls like I didn’t want to be approached by anyone, and no one ever approached me unless I engaged in some type of conversation with someone, so um, but there

would be a lot of days when I just wouldn't talk to anyone and I'd just isolate myself and kind of be in my own head which didn't help at all because it was just me and my thoughts and when you're struggling with who you are sometimes silence is the loudest thing...

Aside from being both a form and consequence of GSB, retreating from others thus appears to be a possible consequence of navigating identity struggles and feeling different from the heteronormative expectations or standard provided by schools. This trend towards a form of self-containment also appeared to emerge in response to GSB in the way that individuals perceived where the blame for such behaviour lay.

#### 6.4.4 Internalizing Blame

Internalized homophobia, or the internalization of anti-gay attitudes (Meyer, 2003) was apparent in a few of the interviews. For instance, Peter expressed that they felt they were sick because they did not understand that being different, and in their case, being gay was an option that could be okay. Because this acceptance was not taught, Peter was forced to struggle and come to their own conclusions within the context of a dominantly negative interpretation of difference. Amanda also expressed that: "...it was stressful and I felt ashamed and I didn't want to be who I was for the longest time just because I thought I was going to be treated like crap...". Taylor was another participant who noted that their bullying experiences and identity struggles were also connected to the adoption of negative attitudes towards difference:

Um, well I dealt a lot with bullying growing up so I grew up to have social anxiety eventually, um, I was really, really scared about being judged by others and, for a while I mean, I was pretty homophobic and transphobic just because of my own internal struggles with that really, trying to understand who I was and why I was feeling how I was...

While this internalized homophobia is certainly problematic in itself, another finding was the tendency for individuals to engage in an individualization of blame. Individuals thus not only appeared to blame themselves for being different, but also internalized the blame for their bullying experiences. Several quotes can be used to support this theme:

**Allison:** "...but at that age, it was all like, what's wrong with me, what can I do to make it better, what, like why do these people hate me so

much. It was like, not a bullying thing, it wasn't their issue, it was like, what is my issue?

**Patrick:** "Um...at the time, I guess I just thought like, everybody hated me. Um, looking back at it now I can see that it was bullying, like, plain as anything, but I mean that's not what it feels like when it's happening. It's not a, um, it's not a um, like a, all of a sudden process, it's a gradual process

[...]

So in terms of your feelings you ah...you slowly start to think about what's wrong with you, try and fix it, and I mean you can't fix it...um, but ah...you try and figure out what's the problem, you don't really realize what's going on, it's slow and gradual. Um, and then slowly like after, like grade thirteen I kind of re-figured it out that it was, that it was bullying, not something I did that...it was just something everybody else had a problem with."

Robert also discussed a certain level of self-blame for their bullying experiences that was tied to feelings of internalized homophobia:

I think at the time I deserved that. I think I was ashamed, kind of. I think I was definitely ashamed of being gay at the time. I didn't even define myself as gay, I mean, but like I knew deep down I was but yeah. It's hard to explain, but yeah, so I thought I kind of deserved it in a way, like I invited it, but yeah.

In this manner, being targeted by bullies was perceived as a problem of the individual who was targeted, rather than a negative behaviour that was imposed upon them by others. Fault was therefore perceived as laying with the individuals who were different, rather than those who were targeting such differences, or with the structures that reinforced notions of normality and difference. Given that participants temporally contextualized this understanding as occurring 'at the time', or 'at that age', this does appear to be a perspective that students were eventually able to move beyond. Nonetheless, this consequence appears to be a clear obstacle for fostering resilience, as it would be increasingly hard to overcome the negative effects of something that you blame yourself for experience in the first place.

### 6.4.5 Negative Coping and Academic Struggles

From the above quotes it is clear that the participants often struggled with both their identity development, as well as having to deal with GSB. Often the two were linked in that participants may have been targeted and labelled for being different, prior to even understanding and identifying as such themselves. Such struggles appeared to have resulted in the participants adopting negative coping strategies in order to avoid becoming a target, or to lessen the extent that they were targeted. Participants discussed a variety of negative coping strategies. For instance, Robert admitted to drug abuse:

The one things is ah, in my high school, like last year of high school I started um, ashamed to say but I started abusing like cocaine and that, um, and I think maybe that drug use ah, had to do, maybe had to do with maybe shame about being gay. I'm sure some of that had to do with certain remarks I would get from other people.

Self-harm was discussed by Heather:

Okay, um back then it definitely really really affected my mental health, especially because like, my um, best friend she would make me feel like awful and I think that um, I started like, self-harming a bit more.

Absenteeism or skipping school was a coping method employed by Peter and Lauren:

**Peter:** “So like, I started a little bit when I was like, in second or third grade. And I would just like, go home sick as often as I could cause I just didn't want to be there cause they were mean...”

**Lauren:** “...if you're not at school as much, and you, not that you're kind of faded out, people still know who you are, but you're definitely not the center of gossip or the center of attention if you're not really going very damn often

[...]

like my mom would call in, because I would like, fake...being sick or something.”

Eating disorders or developing unhealthy relationships with food was another coping strategy that participants employed. This seemed to be a mechanism of coping with GSB, but also appeared to be a way that individuals could better conform to gender or

appearance expectations. For some, this would help to lessen the extent of their differences or help make the differences, or themselves, more invisible:

**Allison:** “High school, oh gee, I went through like, through all of that, through when we started the GSA, I actually got super anemic, and I had like body issues, like I wouldn’t eat properly. Just because I felt...I don’t know. It was a way of compensating.”

**Rebecca:** “I felt a very strong pressure to look a certain way, and I actually went through intensive dieting um, and I lost around thirty pounds and I was even underweight a little bit, um, and that, really destroyed my relationship with food and I still struggle with it until today. Um, in terms of binge eating sometimes and um, purging just to, you know, have the ideal body shape just to meet the expectations of what a girl should look like so...”

**Samantha:** “I had...I had bad habits that made it extremely easy to lean on. Like self-starvation, et cetera. Like I lost forty pounds during that time, so like, that was a weird support system but that helps make your skin thicker when you’re invisible. I lost forty pounds.”

In two cases, that of Nathan and Robert, such negative coping also appeared to contribute to academic struggles. Robert admitted that their drug use “...definitely affected my grades”, and Nathan admitted that part of their catering behaviour purposely involved doing poorly on schoolwork to avoid signaling their difference:

Um, it was for me so, seeing what boys liked to do and how they expressed their interests, you know, um, a lot of kids that I grew up with they didn’t like school so much, they were more so in terms of playing outside or you know, playing sports and stuff, whereas I loved books and I loved learning, and I...I noticed that a lot of the guys you know, whereas I liked reading and writing more, and music and poetry, they didn’t and, whenever I even wanted to show, was good at it, even though I was, I was, you know, I was...it was noticed, you know, whether I did a presentation in class or a presentation in...it was kind of like they picked up on, ‘oh, he’s different in this sense’, and it, that was a problem for me because I would purposely sometimes cater, oh, you know, like actually like not doing so well on something, or you know

[...] because you know that’s what boys can’t like...

From this section, it is clear that students often suffered various negative consequences as a result of experiencing GSB, as well as having to navigate identity development in the

heteronormative context of schools. Furthermore, in some respects it appears as though academic struggles may be linked with attempts to avoid GSB targeting, as well as being a by-product of some of the negative coping strategies that students may employ to deal with GSB and oppressive heteronormative school contexts.

The above examples of negative coping strategies also reinforce the idea that resilience is relative to different contexts and thus individuals can be resilient in certain aspects of their life but may struggle in other areas. For instance, such negative coping mechanisms are not indicative of what one might typically consider strategies that would be used by a resilient individual. Indeed, such harmful behaviours may indicate mental health issues that the participants may still be dealing with (although none admitted to the ongoing use of such methods of coping), thus suggesting that individuals are not as resilient in this regard, or in an overall sense. Yet, despite any ongoing struggles that the participants may still be facing that would classify them as less resilient in some respects, the participants in this study had all transitioned to post-secondary schooling and had done so despite having dealt with GSB and oppressive school climates. Therefore, they can still be considered academically resilient. In the above cases, this academic resilience may also be even more outstanding and commendable given the negative coping strategies which may have also affected academic success. Focusing on how these students were resilient despite these odds may shed light on how school structures could be altered to help future students faced with some of the same struggles be resilient as well.

Given the findings that focus on the negative effects of bullying, there appears to be a juxtaposition that emerges whereby bullying and GSB can be conceptualized as something that is larger than an interaction between students but is also reduced to something that is felt most at the individual level. For example, when considering how the participants described their responses to GSB, a trend towards the individualization of the issue appears. This was apparent in the ways that students internalized the blame for their differences, and for their targeting, but also in the descriptions of how they would shrink inwards in their coping strategies.

Simultaneously, when one considers how GSB was described as more of an omnipresent threat that was pervasive throughout the schooling environment, and less of a behaviour that was centered around the repetitive actions of a single individual or group, the issue can be viewed through a broader lens. Further, when based on notions of difference in relation to gender and sexuality, GSB appears to further the development of hostile and heteronormative school climates. This reaffirms the importance of adopting a more structural approach to understanding the issue, as the interactions that come to be classified or categorized as bullying are taking place within, and working to construct, a school environment that extends beyond the individual and their interactions.

Thus, the widespread negative effects of GSB should be considered by schools looking to address the issue and suggests that the implications span beyond a target/perpetrator duality and includes the climate of the school. Approaches that attempt to address bullying as something more than an isolated incident, and ongoing Ministry efforts to foster safe and accepting environments continue to appear promising for addressing the extent or breadth of the issue, but it is important as well to try to challenge the internalization of blame and look at ways that schools can transform GSB into something that is not an individual issue, but is something rooted in broader social forces that can ultimately be overcome.

## 6.5 Developing Resilience: Sources of Support

In the interviews, students were asked what helped them to get through their experiences. From that data, five themes emerged that might help to address why these students were able to be academically resilient, and the sources of support (or assets and resources in resilience terms) that they found useful. The bullying literature has already suggested that one's family (Bowes, Maughan, Caspi, Moffitt & Arseneault, 2010) and peers (Sapouna & Wolke, 2013) frequently offer support to students, and may thus also be considered as helping to foster resilience. Peers and family support were apparent in the current interviews as resources that helped individuals navigate their bullying experiences. Furthermore, they also appeared to be a source of acceptance that helped individuals come to terms with their difference in the face of oppressive heteronormative school contexts. While such supports thus appear to be key, given that the focus here is



on looking at the ways educational institutions can play a role in fostering resilience, the following themes are centered around the supports that are more closely connected with educational change.

### 6.5.1 It Could Have Been Worse

The first explanation of resilience is rather simplistic in that it represents the idea that the students who were interviewed, with the exception of Patrick, seemed to indicate that their experiences were not as bad as some of their peers. This idea was alluded to with some of the earlier quotes as well. Furthermore, a few participants explained how this level of targeting was the result of luck:

**Leslie:** “As I said, I was lucky enough to have never been picked on much.”

**Veronica:** “...I would say I’ve had one of the luckier bullying experiences, I’ve never um, had an instance where I was physically or mentally like, take out for like a long period of time, um, and there are people who really, really have it hard and I know I don’t have it that hard...”

Whatever the reason for the level of bullying that they experienced, the idea that they did not have to face some of the more severe forms of GSB suggests that they may also not have faced the same level of consequence or threat to their academic success.

This finding should not be used as justification to cease efforts to reduce (if not eliminate) bullying behaviour, nor should it necessarily be taken as a complete indication that things are getting better. Since students often bore witness to more severe instances of GSB and were sometimes negatively impacted by that in an indirect manner, there is still cause for concern. But this also brings up the possibility that such relative comparisons could be a mechanism through which resilience could be developed and a way that individuals coped with their bullying experiences.

Research that investigates the *perception* of relative experiences of bullying and the connection to resilient outcomes is a potential avenue that seemingly has yet to be explored. Elsewhere, it has been found that those with higher levels of self-esteem and those who were less socially alienated were able to be more resilient when it came to

experiences of depression (Sapouna and Wolke, 2013). Since factors such as self-esteem and feelings of social alienation could be impacted by comparisons to others, it seems fruitful to investigate whether a relative comparison when it comes to experiences of bullying could then be related to the development of resilience. In a sense, this would be a reversal of the notion of relative deprivation and the negative effects that may arise from such disadvantage. If individuals are advantaged in relation to others who experience more severe targeting, there may be implications for the extent to which bullying is then viewed as an obstacle and the resilience that is needed to overcome their less-severe bullying experiences.

### 6.5.2 Escaping Through Education

Amongst the negative coping mechanisms that students employed to deal with their experiences, some also mentioned how they turned to academics as a result of the negative peer interactions they were subjected to, or the social isolation that they experienced from GSB. Allison, for example, explained:

My school experience, um, well in public school I did better in school because I didn't really talk to many people. There was one or two that I was good friends with, and then the rest of the time I had for my schooling so that actually helped me in that way.

Emily echoed this idea as well:

Um, if anything I think it was better for, um, my grades because I just focused more on school, um

[...]

but yeah, I think academically it ended up being good.

In this sense, while 'escaping through education' does little to address GSB, it does offer a potential explanation for why these students were able to be academically resilient.

Although Nathan originally admitted to tempering their academic success as a way of fitting in to the expected gender norms, they appeared to reach a tipping point when academics became more of a solution than a problem. Doing well in school thus seemed

to be a way that Nathan could in some way compensate for their difference or deviant identity:

...I was different and I was, in a sense, maybe compensating, you know I want to do well for school because it will...this is all the cons, well at least here's a pro to kind of balance it out. So it was much more of a motivating factor for me to do well. I genuinely did like learning, but it was, definitely a part of it was I needed a way to deal with this and if...if there was, you know, everyone...it was almost like, I remember actually like, in grade six there was someone, 'you don't like sports, and you don't like this, well why do you even bother?' and I remember that struck me as a very moment, where I was like, well what is it that I have to give, they basically, the people that did pick on me, they instilled it in my head that I had to offer something, and whatever it is, I just had to give it, because if I didn't, I had nothing. So um, and yeah. I guess, I worked my butt off just to excel because I thought it was a way to escape the...the way of dealing with things...

Furthermore, educational attainment appeared to be something that students strived to achieve, as it was seen as a way of escaping from their current negative contexts.

Nathan, for example, saw this as a way out of their rural town and the oppressive school environment:

It was more so, the only outlet I had was trying to do my best in school to try and get into a good school later on, that was my way of coping in a sense. Most of the time I just kept to myself and...kept quiet, and...yeah.

Educational success was also given as a possible avenue for escape by Samantha's teachers who expressed that post-secondary school contexts would be better environments. Unfortunately, this encouragement seemed to be a way to ignore the limitations of their current school context. Samantha explained, "Oh yeah, especially like some teachers who I would try to confide in them and they would just be like 'oh, university will be better'".

This notion that 'it gets better', or students just need to push through their negative experiences in order to reach a final more positive environment, is problematic in that it fails to address or challenge the current harmful context that individuals have few choices but to endure. Secondary schooling is mandatory in Ontario (at least for those students under the age of eighteen who have yet to complete grade twelve). As such, when

students are required to attend schools where a negative school climate persists, this can be function as a barrier to overall academic success, and one that might also hinder a student's choice to move on to post-secondary attendance. Based only on the knowledge of their existing educational experiences, it is likely that students might otherwise assume that college or university climates could be as negative as what they had endured up to that point. Thus, while encouraging the perspective that post-secondary will be a better school experience is something that educators can do to encourage academic resilience, it should not be at the expense or in lieu of other efforts to improve the mandatory school contexts.

### 6.5.3 Normalizing Difference

Another way that educators were able to help students navigate their negative experiences was to provide examples where difference became normalized. For example, 'out' educators simply going about their lives appeared to be a source of inspiration for students who may have been struggling with their identity or facing bullying as a repercussion for their 'deviance':

**Audrey:** "If it wasn't for them, we wouldn't have one of those clubs and it wouldn't be as normalized, because this teacher was very very open. The head teacher, um, was very very open about the fact that she was lesbian and she would bring her wife into work and she, would show us, her wedding pictures of her like, big lesbian wedding. It was amazing, like it was just, it was really inspiring to see..."

**Leslie:** "Well I'd say like, because I was in the club and the teachers who ran the club were gay as well, and one of them, she was actually married, she had a baby, cute, awesome, kind of gave you a little bit of hope and all that. Um, and that was a good, great support system there because...you know, they can relate to you. It's easier when an adult who's like already been through everything you're going through can give you advice, so I'd say in that sense teachers helped because you know they've been through what you've been through and they've made it farther than you, so it definitely gives you hope with older people in the same situation."

Although Samantha did not have such role models, this was something they expressed that they wished they had had:

It would have been nice to have had some role models...like tangible role models, not like some in the media, or something. But to have someone who maybe like, 'I'm thirty-five, and I'm a lesbian and my life is working out okay', do you know what I mean?

Emily also found that having an SGM educator as a role model was helpful in helping to foster greater self-acceptance:

...I think the one teacher who started, I think he started in grade eleven, um, but we became sort of closer in grade twelve, and, he was the gay teacher who came to our school. Um, I think a lot of it sort of, a lot of my perspective changed around him, um, because he...I think he was like a very strong role model to have, he'd sort of...ah, embraced life and he didn't even...he never even really came out to anyone, um, like he never made it a point to be like 'oh I'm gay by the way', it was just sort of, something that we knew um, and like we'd see him with his boyfriend and it was sort of, I think the way people reacted to him, changed a lot and the way that teachers reacted to him, because it was...he was seen as no different from anyone else, and that was sort of what I wanted to be, so, I think the more time I spent with him, sort of the more...I guess, I think the more, ah, confident I was about that, and also, oh, how do it put it? Um, I mean he didn't know I was bi, he just thought I was another student, um, but like we spent a lot of time together because of my photography, um, and I think a lot of it was just, he taught me a lot about just how to embrace who I was...

Even though the educator in Emily's case was not overly vocal about their sexuality, this also seemed to be a positive thing as it appeared to assist in the normalizing of such difference. Much like Aldridge and colleagues (2018) have suggested, efforts to highlight diversity may in fact reify notions of difference. In this instance, being overly vocal or seeking to highlight their SGM status may in fact have had an opposite effect, whereas remaining silent about their sexuality appears to have had a more normalizing outcome.

Such models also appear to interrupt the 'risk-based' assumptions commonly associated with SGM individuals. Having such positive examples of individuals who are not necessarily exceptional or outliers in another sense (i.e. SGM celebrities), appears to be a way to showcase that there is a community of individuals who do not adhere to the normative gender and sexual standards, who are still managing to live their lives and

succeed. This further supports the call for moving away from a focus of SGM individuals as ‘at risk’ towards sharing more stories of success or those ‘at promise’.

#### 6.5.4 Owning It

Once students were better able to understand difference and accept that this was not necessarily a bad thing, they were better able to accept their identity, and in doing so, cope with bullying. The theme of ‘owning it’ thus represents this transition point and the ability of students to own their identities. Furthermore, this theme appears to tie into Cass’s (1979) identity model, or the last two stages in the process of coming out whereby individuals engage in identity pride and identity synthesis. In these respective stages, individuals tend to give less weight to the opinion of heterosexuals (or in this case those who are bullying them) and subsequently one’s non-heterosexual identity can become less of a master status and more of a status that comes to be integrated with other aspects of the self (Cass, 1979). Much evidence can be found in the interviews that supports both stages.

First, there was evidence that participants reached a point at which they no longer cared about the opinions of others who thought that their differences were wrong:

**Emily:** “Um...I think I also hit a point where I just stopped listening, um, and I guess I also reached a point where I knew people were saying things about me, but I sort of stopped caring so much, um, because I understood, so they didn’t necessarily have to um, I knew that they weren’t people who really mattered in my life, so, ah, sort of...I think as I became more comfortable with myself, the less it affected me, just because of the way I could handle myself.

[...]

I mean, I’ve sort of, gone from seeing, seeing it as okay for people to ah, I guess, talk about me that like that, or assume things about me, to well one not caring, and just listening to how I feel, um...but actually that is probably the only thing, but um, yeah, I feel like it’s just made me stronger in a sense of, I rely more on what I think than what other people think. Um, and I don’t really think other people’s opinions matter as much, because so what if the world is behind on this sort of thing, I get it, and that’s really all I need, all I really need to have.”

**Taylor:** “Um, I’d kind of laugh about it now because, it just...I don’t care anymore. It’s who I am, I’ve accepted myself and if someone else thinks that there’s a problem then that’s, that’s their problem, that’s not my problem.”

As well, several participants also expressed the idea of identity synthesis and accepted their difference as one of many aspects of themselves. This idea was indicated best by Charlie, Emily and Nathan:

**Charlie:** “..because I’m not just gay, I’m me.”

**Emily:** “...whatever your sexuality is, you’re still a person.”

**Nathan:** “I used to, define myself as gay as my identity, but over time it was also accepting that it was only a part of me, because growing up...I was told you’re gay, you’re gay, and that’s it. And I think that was another issue. Is that...it wasn’t, you know, I was [Nathan] who happened to be gay, not, the gay guy, you know? It was very much a person first, and then learning that this is part of me, and that also that change of perspective, because growing up I was told ‘you’re gay and that’s it’, you know? And that’s what I felt like...that’s all that people viewed me as. Oh, that’s the kid who’s not into girls and that was it. And that had a huge, and that’s what I generally thought, but then I would notice that you could be gay and also all these wonderful other things, I think that’s what the perspective is too. It’s very easy to identify as something and have that as your soul part of your identity, especially when that’s something that all people targeted you for...and you think, well that’s all I am, then what else is there kind of thing?”

The point at which participants appeared to reach these stages varied. Some individuals such as Charlie and Peter made claims throughout their interviews that suggested this happened early on in high school. Others appeared to have undergone this transition after leaving high school and were further aided by being in a more accepting post-secondary environment.

Of those who likely went through this process earlier, this acceptance of identity appeared to allow students the ability to better deal with bullying situations and in some cases lessen the power that bullies had over them. Emily, Charlie and Peter displayed this as evidenced in the following quotes:

**Emily:** “Um, I mean it started when I shaved part of my head, I think that was...I mean, it was because I really wanted to, um, and for style and everything, but also I was ah, um, you know, I don’t care what any of you think, um, and I think from then, I mean things got worse, but for me, I think they also started to get better, um, I mean people would say more things, um, it was harder for my friends, but I think for me, I’d sort of, I was sort of starting to own it more, and I think made it better.”

**Charlie:** “...but then once I came out in grade ten, people didn’t have any power over me in that they couldn’t call me gay and I’d be upset about it because was like ‘yes, true, you caught me’.”

**Peter:** “Ah, like, obviously like things happen and like gossip and whatnot and like I came out in high school too so, there was that. I think once I came out everything changed. Like it was kind of like, someone would call me gay and I’d be like ‘yeah, I am’, like I own it.”

Unfortunately, while coming out and beginning to ‘own it’ appears to be one way of mitigating the power of bullies, and may also provide protection from the denial of identity differences found in heteronormative contexts, this process simultaneously appeared to be hindered by the fear of being bullied and/or the perception of an oppressive school climate.

In a somewhat contradictory sense, it occasionally seemed that it was experiencing GSB itself that encouraged individuals to move through this identity development process. Thus, owning it also appears to be tied to the idea that some participants came to own their bullying experiences and see how there could be positive consequences from this as well. Again, this acceptance is likely to occur at different points for different individuals, but at the time of the interviews, Emily, Leslie and Nathan all appeared to articulate this idea:

**Emily:** “I know I understand myself a lot better because of it. Um, it sort of forced me to ah, think about myself and who I am and what I want um, so I definitely have a better understanding of myself.”

**Leslie:** “I think, that it’s, it sounds weird, but I think it’s made me more confident in who I am because I’ve had to like, explain to people why what they’re saying is not okay and I’ve had to explain to people...why, like, I did a pretty good job the other night actually. I’d say. Like, it’s just like, I understand myself better because of having to explain it and...that



makes me more confident in being able to defend myself, makes me more confident to be able to be myself...”

**Nathan:** “...I did so much thinking and dwelling on things that, you know, it’s true when they say the years of struggle strike you as the most beautiful, because I thought the years that I was constantly critically thinking about my own sexuality, got me to a point where I found a place of acceptance, and just openness with myself.”

Therefore, in some cases it appeared as though experiencing GSB was a mechanism through which one’s identity could become better understood, and this understanding would then have a protective or ‘steeling’ effect against future instances of GSB. Such self-acceptance as a result of bullying should not be taken as evidence supporting the notion that bullying is and should be excused as ‘just a part of growing up’. There are other more positive ways of fostering self-acceptance that do not also come with a wide array of associated negative effects. As such, this highlights another area where schools can help to encourage student acceptance of difference and do so earlier when students are first exposed to the negative uses of identity markers such as when ‘gay’ and ‘lesbian’ are used as insults. Furthermore, this need not focus exclusively on notions of self-acceptance. Instead, by working to foster a general sense of acceptance, this should help to address the underlying attitudes of such GSB, and also the negative evaluations of difference that the participants seemed to internalize. In this manner individuals may be more prepared to move through the identity development or coming out process, whenever they may wish to do so, and thus ultimately be more prepared to ‘own it’ in the face of challenging forces.

### 6.5.5 Resistance as Resilience

In a few instances, participants appeared to pose their own challenges to heteronormative ideals and their school environments that can be considered markers of (non-academic) resilience in the face of GSB. For instance, by acknowledging their difference, Peter seems to lay down a challenge to the bullies to get them to question what is so wrong about being gay. By accepting oneself and not allowing one’s difference to be used as an insult against them, Peter appeared to resist the dominance of heteronormativity and challenge the assumptions of non-acceptance held by others. Emily and Taylor as well

appeared to be resistant in continuing to defy expected gender norms set out by society and reinforced by their peers. Their decision to dress and style themselves in the manner that they wished in the face of GSB and assertions of non-heterosexuality appear to challenge the assumptions that still connect gender with sex and sexual orientation. Furthermore, Allison displayed an element of resistance in calling for and participating in the creation of their school's GSA, and also becoming the visible face of the group through making announcements about GSA meetings and activities, despite any personal repercussions that they faced as a result. This can also be considered as an effort to challenge the dominance of heteronormativity within their school context.

Resistance within the post-secondary context was also apparent during the interviews. Samantha's work with their university Pride organization reinforces the idea that there was a desire to challenge the normative expectations and provide support to other SGM individuals throughout their post-secondary experiences:

... I'm just appreciative of some of those circumstances because it made me focus on my communication skills and how I am able to address them and staying calm in not so calm situations. Um, but even like defending myself and like um, creating safer spaces, like you can't create a safe space without being able to recognize what is unsafe elsewhere. So um, I feel like it has been incredibly productive. I feel like it's like I've kind of found a niche in life just being able to be there for people, not that I have any kind of professional standing in that sense in terms of counselling or anything, but like um just being able to hold my office hours on campus, have that be funded by administration, have people actually come to me and be where I was five, six years ago, um...yeah.

Andrew was another participant who became involved in a different campus group that aimed to foster a welcoming environment and provide peer support for first year students looking to adjust to post-secondary school. This group, according to Andrew was "...all allies, kind of no judgement, no biases...".

As another form of support, many participants expressed their preparedness and willingness to intervene should they witness or become the target of GSB in the future (although most believed that this was unlikely given the more accepting climate of post-secondary institutions). Again, this is likely related to the different stages of identity

development and the capacity for individuals to not only understand themselves, but also to 'own it'. Being vocal, educating others about diversity, and refusing to hide who they were and how they wished to act were many of the ways that participants engaged in, and would likely continue to engage in resistance in post-secondary contexts.

Efforts to engage in resistance or help to foster resilience through future occupational careers was also an apparent goal of several participants. For example, despite some uncertainty regarding their future career trajectory, Robert expressed a desire to find an occupation that would allow them to work towards making a difference to the system:

...I don't have like a firm career direction, I wish I knew like a specific job occupation that I would like to enter, but like I do know, and again this sounds very general and maybe kind of corny but I want to help people and ah, in some way, and I think that you know bullying based on my sexual orientation that I endured has made me realize that like, yeah, I would like to help maybe in some way that like, gay teenager struggling with his sexual orientation. Like not specifically focusing on um, like, gay teenagers, but if I could help them in some way, in setting up some sort of education program, anti-bullying program, then yeah.

Thus, in many ways the participants demonstrated not only academic resilience at the individual level, but also illustrated ways through which their resilience or academic success could also be translated into acts of resistance at a broader or more structural level.

Such signs of personal resistance are likely to have a limited effect in challenging the heteronormative structural forces of schools and the ongoing pervasiveness of GSB, at least independent of other collective action. Furthermore, they are also unlikely to be taken up by individuals forced to hide for fear of becoming a target of GSB, especially in high schools or earlier. This also illustrates how the onus continues to remain on individuals for not only overcoming their experiences, but also challenging the forces that sustain those experiences. Nonetheless, the exercise of such resistance appears to illuminate certain pathways for structural changes to not only more freely allow for these individual acts of resistance, but also to challenge the heteronormative forces that necessitate the need for resilience in the first place.

## 6.6 Structural Barriers to Interrupting GSB and Fostering Resilience

Student interviews provided a few instances of how schools and educators were supportive in their experiences, but more often than not, problematic or failing to provide the support they deemed as necessary for helping to navigate or prevent GSB.

Furthermore, students also shared the need for schools to provide the structure through which SGM could come to better understandings of their difference, which as suggested above appears to be a key mechanism through which resilience can be fostered. The following six themes illustrate some of the main structural challenges and changes that are needed to better address GSB and foster resilience.

### 6.6.1 Thriving...in a Post-Secondary Context

Student experiences seemed to illustrate a stark contrast between oppressive school contexts prior to transitioning to post-secondary, and more open and supportive contexts after the transition:

**Lauren:** “Um, the experience has been pretty good, like overall a pretty damn good experience. Not just with respects to like, feeling included, just...in general it’s been really good overall so far.”

**Holly:** “Um...academically but like, socially as well, I just find like it’s better than high school”

**Patrick:** Um, I mean, here I walk around with a pin on my backpack that, that’s say’s ‘I’m gay’, right, and I mean, I’m not afraid to do that here, right? In high school I would not have done that if someone gave me a million dollars. So just everything about university has been so much better, um, from the programs to the people, professors are great, um, just everything is better.”

Throughout several of the interviews, students expressed how their level of engagement in school communities, academic success, and positive perceptions of the educational context differed considerably from what their earlier school experiences were like.

Although the argument could be made that individuals were older and thus more mature, for the most part participants offered other more structural-based reasons for why things had improved in post-secondary schools. For example, Patrick explained why they

believed individuals engaged in bullying and suggested that there were more opportunities to be part of something, thus lessening the need to fit in through bullying:

I mean I think people bully because they're ah, either something is going on at home that they aren't proud of, they're like just the...I mean I've watched enough ah, I've watched enough cartoons to realize that there are cartoons, and after school family shows you realize that bullies have as many problems as, as everybody else, just...it's just how they kind of...but when it comes to like, sexuality and bullying, it's not the people who are, I don't think that's the case, I don't think it's the people that have problems at home who are insecure about something, I think it's that they're just, well maybe it is that they're insecure about something, I think it's that they themselves either want to fit in, so if everyone else is doing it we should do it, or it's more of a...if he's out kind of I'm in. So, almost like a competition kind of thing. So, if there's this many spots, then he can't be in one of the spots, even better, because that's more of a chance for me, so I think it has more to do with that. I mean, I've never taken psychology, I don't understand necessarily why people do things like that but um, that's what it felt like and looking back that's still what I think it was. Um, and that's why I think university...like at university, right, to flip it around, I think it's much better because no one is worried about not being able to be a part of something because if they want to be a part of something, there's so much they can be a part of here that, they can do anything so, great, you're part of this, awesome, you're part of this, awesome, you don't all need to be part of one thing. I think in high school everyone is trying to be part of one thing, whether it's the popular kids or whatever, um, and that need to belong to that I think is one of the sole reasons for why, why ah, they would bully me.

Taylor also indicated that the inclusion of topics of diversity and the acceptability of such was something that would help to send a message of respect to peers:

Um, there's a lot more talk about it in university, that's something that I've noticed. Um, maybe that's just kind of the classes I'm talking, ah, but...and everyone is just a bit more educated, I think and, especially most of the people are taking some kind of social science so, there kind of being taught to respect the differences.

These discussions were also embedded as subject material in classes:

**Samantha:** "...it's become subject matter, whether it's that ten minutes at the beginning of class, or it's an entire series of lectures. That's what matters. And it's a great model. Like I wish people from grades like seven to ten would kind of take up that kind of model, because it is very participatory, it's welcoming..."

This support from educators was also apparent, at least from Samantha's point of view, in the way that educators attended external events to demonstrate their support for diversity. For example, Samantha noted seeing their instructors at Pride parades or at Take Back the Night events and this helped to reinforce a sense of acceptance and support.

Such structural suggestions for why post-secondary school was better for them often echoed the changes that participants thought would be beneficial if integrated into earlier educational contexts. Student suggestions for such school changes are explored in the following themes.

### 6.6.2 Creating Supportive Environments

One of the main differences between post-secondary and earlier school contexts was in the extent to which GSB was perceived as allowable. Whereas participants felt they would be more likely to stand up to GSB themselves, this was also something they perceived educators would be less accepting of. In contrast, earlier school contexts were reported as being places where GSB was allowed to occur and a sort of tacit approval of this behaviour was given by educators in failing to intervene when they knew it was going on. This idea was supported numerous times throughout the interviews and is evidenced in the following quotes:

**Taylor:** "Some teachers would intervene, others just would not care

[...]

I mean they'd intervene if it was any other kind of bullying, but if someone's calling a student gay then they tend to brush it off, at least in my experience."

**Samantha:** "I didn't come from a school where that behaviour would be stopped."

**Peter:** "...students never had to hide that they were bullying me. Teachers would look the other way a lot. Like, there's like, like hands down teachers would look the other way and that actually pisses me off now, cause like, there's no way if I was ever teaching a class that I would look the other way if somebody was ruining an experience for someone else, like a learning experience."

This lack of intervention was also apparent in Veronica's interview, but instead it was in response to student disclosure of online bullying:

...this was an advisor, kind of like a guidance counsellor, and she didn't do anything about it. We waited a week and nothing happened

[...] waited a few more days, nothing was happening, went into the Vice-Principal, still nothing was happening, um, go to a math teacher, math teacher took it very, very seriously, she took it to the principal

[...]

I don't think he even suffered any consequences, maybe he got a detention, but we didn't hear of anything serious. I just felt so frustrated, that nothing was done.

A perception of inaction was given in Lauren's interview, and this was enough to inhibit the reporting of bullying:

...it's hard to want to talk to somebody about bullying or being bullied, when you don't even really like this person, like 'hey, I'm experiencing homophobic bullying, I don't like you, but I'm telling you anyway' and I didn't know who to talk to. Teachers don't have a whole lot of authority, the teachers probably would have said 'you should go talk to the principal' and I'm like, the principal is a total dick. I'm not talking to the principal. He's not going to do anything about it anyway. I had no proof. It's like, me against like, two, three other people who are probably going to A deny it, or B say that I'm exaggerating it, and what's going to happen anyway, they're not going to, they're probably not going to get in trouble. All I'm going to do is...make a case against myself socially, and that'll be even worse probably than coming out in the damn first place, so I just remember thinking, you know what, I'm probably better off just not doing anything about it.

Thus, the real and perceived lack of enforcement was certainly a problematic feature of earlier educational contexts and was also one that participants felt would not occur in post-secondary environments. Such lack of anti-bullying enforcement not only sends an implicit message to the targets that nothing will happen, but also sends the message to perpetrators that this behaviour is at least allowable. Although many instances of bullying go unreported and teachers are not always aware of the extent of bullying that takes place (Fekkes, Pijpers & Verloove-Vanhorick, 2005), it was the silence in response to homophobic events or comments when witnessed by teachers that was one of the most

serious issues for participants. By not intervening in the instances that they did bear witness to, this may also further decrease the likelihood of self-reporting. Such lack of intervention appeared to influence the level of support that students felt from educators and ignoring the underlying attitudes appeared to do little to challenge the informal education students received from GSB that suggested such identities were wrong or problematic.

### 6.6.3 Educating Educators

When educators did intervene to address the bullying, participants felt as though the response was incomplete, in that teachers often stopped at admonishing the behaviour, without addressing why the behaviour was problematic. Taylor, Leslie and Charlotte best summarize this:

**Taylor:** “You know I remember people saying ‘that’s so gay’ all the time, you know people saying ‘oh you know, you shouldn’t say that’ but they didn’t say why so, no one really cared about why they shouldn’t so they just kind of kept saying it anyways.”

**Leslie:** “...guys will bug other guys a lot and be like, they’ll say like ‘faggot’ and ‘gay’ and stuff like that and I find, like I’ll see teachers just walk right down the hall by them and not say anything about it, but then they’ll make an announcement in an assembly, not addressing the specific people but everyone, being like, ‘watch your language’, so I think maybe if a teacher would just call out the student...I don’t know why, maybe it’s just my school but they wouldn’t call out kids, they’d just give a general speech.”

**Charlotte:** “Teachers would intervene very passively, so if someone was saying something or like yelling something across the class at him, they would just be like ‘sit down, be quiet’ as if they were just yelling whatever, right? But in addition they’re saying something homophobic and that wasn’t addressed, like it’s not like we were ever sat down and been like ‘well that’s not okay, do you understand what you’re saying when you say that? And do you understand the effects that can have on someone?’. Like there was never anything like that. The teacher that did the Gay Straight Alliance, she was phenomenal. Um, she would point out stuff like that, but because she would it would never happen in that class, so it fluctuated from teacher to teacher.”

Although Charlotte’s example highlighted that some teachers were more effective in intervening the way that SGM individuals would find most beneficial, it appears as



though participants felt that educators overall and, on the whole, needed to be more explicit about the unacceptability of such behaviours. This call for explicit attention was also expressed by Jennifer who stated:

I mean obviously, not every teacher's just going to walk up to the front of the class on day one and be like 'I'm not going to discriminate based on your gender or sexuality' um, but I almost wish they would

[...]

I think that if there had been kind of more, um, explicit acceptance and stuff with like, if it had...come up or been more acknowledged, that like it is okay to be gay and we're not tolerating any sort of discrimination because of it...but there wasn't really an overall feeling of that...

While educators may feel that this is implied in their actions to interrupt the bullying, by not addressing the GSB element it almost appeared to undermine the interventions that did occur.

In several instances, it was expressed that this incomplete response may be because educators themselves were not sure of the best ways to intervene when it came to GSB, or were not aware enough to identify it in the first place:

**Samantha:** "...you can't expect faculty that has never had any kind of sensitivity training in this area to have any sensitivity. Like why would you? Unless you have personal experience, or you have had some kind of encounter like the situation before, but like what are you supposed to do? And that is why education is key."

**Andrew:** "...it would bring it to the forefront of their minds so that, they might not even be aware that it's happening, if it's right in front of them, so giving them kind of, the background and the subtleties because it is, like if you're not thinking about it, I...someone who doesn't really have any experiences with someone who is LGBT might not pick up on any of that. Um, yeah, so I guess just knowledge is power."

Once again, this difference in willingness and understanding of how to intervene was something that appeared to participants because of the identity-based nature of the bullying, and in particular, the connection to gender and sexuality. Patrick felt this was a factor that was exacerbated by their religious-based school context:

Um, I don't think they ah, I don't want to say they didn't care because, I think they did. Um, I think part of the problem was they didn't know how to help. I mean, I didn't blame them. I didn't know how to help. I just needed help.

[...]

but I don't want to say it's a lack of education because these people have undergraduate degrees and teacher's college degrees, so I mean, they're educated people but, um, just not...they weren't educated um, especially being part of a Catholic school they weren't educated, or they might not have been educated um, in the right way to deal with not just like, my issues, but even um, like they would probably be more suited to deal with like, if I was being made fun of because I was Black, or something like that. I feel like couldn't deal with that because they were taught how to deal with stuff like that, but they weren't how to deal with um, with people getting bullied because of their sexuality...

Thus, 'educating educators' was an initiative that participants expressed as being a potential mechanism for reinforcing the necessity of intervention in cases of GSB, but also conveying the best ways in which to intervene that would more completely address the issue.

#### 6.6.4 Making Bullies Understand

Such outright explanation of why GSB was problematic was also given as a way to educate bullies about why that behaviour was problematic and about the consequences for their actions. For many participants, bullies were not seen as intent upon causing harm. For example, Nathan expressed that bullies were those who did not want to be targeted themselves:

...it was their way of...being a part of it, you know, it was like, me being the enemy was their way in to get together cause they, 'oh well, I feel the same way so...', you know, it was kind of, that sort of effect, yeah, like a rippling effect, if one person does it the rest also do it because, if one person voices an objection and they too become the part of the victim in a sense.

Nathan's comment thus appears to align with a status-based explanation, in that bullies were not bullying to harm, but rather to avoid being bullied themselves. Samantha and

Patrick were the only other participants who appeared to provide comments resembling status-based explanations of bullying behaviour.

Overall, participants appeared to excuse the behaviour of bullies as a result of not understanding difference and also not comprehending that what they were doing was bullying:

**Peter:** "...cause it's ignorance. A lot of bullying is just ignorance. People don't know. So if you knew, if you're educated, you wouldn't bully at all."

**Samantha:** "...if you've never had any education on the subject, then like, why wouldn't you do that? I mean, it's kind of like natural to fear or ridicule things that you don't understand..."

**Leslie:** I think it would be better in terms of bullying because...if you have a better understanding from a young age of other people, different things, things that may not apply to you, then I think, you know, you'll be better at dealing with it through your whole life. I think that's how it is with...most things. Pretty much everything.

[...]

And I still think a lot of the time, it is bullying, even though they don't understand. Like I used to say they didn't understand, that's my excuse, and I would say they don't understand and they're bullying, it's not an excuse for not understanding because there's other ways to go about...educating yourself, and like stuff like that, than, than just making rude comments."

This lack of understanding also extended to the perception that bullies did not understand the consequences of their actions, and had they had this understanding, the behaviour may not have occurred. Allison provides a good example of this sentiment: "um, teaching them that what they do, there are great consequences [...] and they definitely need to know about that and to understand that everyone is equal, and then to understand like what can happen after and those consequences of it..."

Thus, education about difference and the acceptability of such, along with the consequences of GSB, were seen as ways that schools could better reduce the likelihood of GSB. It was also important for participants that this education started in earlier grades

than when they were exposed to it as would help to interrupt one's informal education about difference. Quotes from Sarah and Emily help to illustrate this:

**Sarah:** "I guess through education...ah, ideally before [bullying] arises. So in the younger classes where it's not there, there's no one to categorize because it hasn't developed yet, to educate and teach about, you know, acceptance of different things and especially with all the new transgender things that we experience in our society today, to just teach about all of these things and expose children to that, so that they're not taken aback by it when they encounter it and feel the need to sort of defend themselves by bullying.

[...]

Because I think the reason why people bully people who are different is because they make them uncomfortable and they're not used to them, like people who are racist usually haven't been exposed to a lot of people of different nationalities and I think it's the same sort of thing here, where if you get the young exposure on, and socialize them with different types of people then they're accustomed to different types of people and will feel less inclined to bully them."

**Emily:** "...maybe more education on um...ah, what's the word, um, I think sort of it if was more taught in schools, sort of what it is and what it means, or even if gender was just more taught in schools, um, I think people would be less ignorant and less confused because I mean, a lot of people didn't realize they were doing anything wrong, and they just thought 'oh you know, well she looks like this, so she's a lesbian', but I think, lot of it was just lack of understanding so I think maybe if there's more education, from a younger age, I think there'd be less of it. That would have probably helped a bit if people understood."

This need to understand also closely relates to the definition of bullying that was provided by the Ministry. The definition considers actions by individuals that are intended to create a negative environment for others, or actions that students *ought to know* will contribute to a negative environment, as bullying (emphasis added, Ontario Ministry of Education, 2018b). If individuals do not understand how their actions may constitute bullying (for example by using words such as lesbian as insults in an indirect manner), and schools do not work to frame GSB and such behaviours as fostering a harmful environment, then this has implications for what behaviours students ought to have known would constitute harmful actions or environments. Ultimately, this increases the need for schools to ensure students are educated about various forms of bullying and

the implications of voicing derogatory slurs, even in an indirect manner, and while ‘making bullies understand’ does less to help foster resilience, if effective at addressing the perpetuation of GSB, it would certainly help to lessen the need to rely on resilience.

### 6.6.5 Missing the Mark with Current Supports

Several supports that schools are engaged in were outlined in the earlier educational initiatives chapter. Some participants expressed that they had had access to such supports (i.e. GSAs) in high school, along with other anti-bullying programs. Nonetheless, there was an overall sense of failure that was conveyed in the interviews. This theme thus reflects the various ways that schools were attempting to respond to GSB and support students, and how these initiatives often tended to ‘miss the mark’ in addressing the issue or were otherwise perceived as being inaccessible for students.

Firstly, educators were often denied the opportunity to address bullying since students failed to report it. While this idea was alluded to earlier in that educators were perceived as not willing to intervene and this was one reason that students failed to report, another reason was that students did not want to be perceived as needing help. Rebecca explained how the onus is often placed on students to report their bullying, but this may have negative implications on how those students are perceived:

I think [teachers are] awesome and they will give you the support if you explain it to them, but at the same time, um, in school they teach you a lot about speaking up for yourself and telling other people when you’re being bullied, but I think that’s a very fair...sorry, that’s a very unfair expectation of students, because there are huge repercussions if you tell on someone and then other people don’t agree with you, and then they have this perception that you, you know, you’re a tattler, so I wish there was some way to solve that, but right now, I’m not really sure if...I personally can’t think of anything to deal with that.

Sarah as well provides another example of this. Although Sarah was forced by their mother to report their bullying, they were reluctant to do so and ultimately did not find it to be helpful:

...And after that [meeting] he’d call me over every once in a while and say like, you know, ‘How are you doing? Are you okay with this group? Are you okay if I sit you with so and so?’, and I always said like ‘Yeah, it’s

fine, do whatever you want'. But he did, ah show some concern as to what I was doing.

Interviewer: Did you find that helpful?

Sarah: No, as I said before, like it just made me so uncomfortable that he was ah, I guess acknowledging the fact that I was different, it was making it more official and I'd rather just stay away from him too because I don't want anyone to feel bad for me, I don't like feeling pitied.

Being viewed differently was a particular concern for SGM individuals who felt that they would be forced to come out by admitting to educators that they were targets of GSB.

Nathan and Jennifer were two of several participants who expressed this idea:

**Nathan:** "I think, for me especially, it's in fear of, you know, not being ready to accept my sexuality, so if I went to someone to address an issue, it was almost like I was forcing myself to come out, in a sense, and I think that was a scary thing".

**Jennifer:** "I didn't feel like I would get anywhere by going and talking to the VP and being like, 'Look, here's what's happening' and I didn't really know if I could trust him enough to be like it's because of my sexuality."

Charlotte also expressed that this was something they needed to consider when helping their friend navigate dealing with GSB. Although Charlotte wanted to address this with a teacher, they did not want to inadvertently 'out' their friend:

...[it] was hard to explain to teachers because you don't want to say 'oh my friend is being bullied because people think he's gay' and I don't know, it's...you don't want to have someone else overhear that and then think the rumours are true...

Being forced to come out to access supports was also given as a reason that many students expressed failing to join their school's GSA. For example, Jennifer expressed that "...there was the GSA and the feeling that it was kind of this silly pointless, ineffective little club, ah, and kind of this feeling that like, stay away from there, you don't want to be associated with that". Lauren had a similar experience, but also felt that they would have likely benefitted from being a part of the GSA if they had been prepared to be out at their school:

...it was a gay straight alliance for students and teachers...but there was like next to nobody in it like student-wise. And I tried to go to a few [meetings], but there was just so few people there, it was like, this is just...no. I just didn't go. Also because I was nervous if people saw me going then they'd know I was, well even though it was called the Gay-Straight Alliance for that reason, people might still think that I was lesbian or gay like, bisexual at least, just by attending those, so I was like, you know I'm just going to like stay away from any labels that might...might, lead other people to think I'm attached to this community

[...]

Like if I knew, for example if I stayed in that Gay-Straight Alliance at [my high school], my life might have been a lot easier quite frankly, cause then I would have found teachers at the school and the guidance counsellors who I could have talked to. I could have found other students, who like, out of their peers, who I knew would have been okay with it had I kind of talked to them about it, and I could have been open with them. That would have made it a lot easier if I could have just talked about it.

Andrew also expressed that although their school did not have one, they likely would not have participated since it would involve some form of 'coming out':

I wasn't...out or open so I don't think I would have participated [had there been one], um, but at the same time, it would have been nice to know that there was support and resources but, I don't necessarily think I would have taken advantage of that

[...]

for fear of having to come out I guess.

Although the presence of a GSA could be viewed as a source of support independent of participation (as suggested by Andrew's quote), this full extent to which GSAs can support students appears, at least from the interviews conducted here, to be hindered by the implied coming out that appears to accompany participation in such activities.

Furthermore, even though such non-participation could be considered more a matter of self-preservation than an intentional act of disassociation from those in the GSA (who were often perceived to be of a lower social status) the effect was likely similar. By avoiding the GSA, student participants appeared to be engaged in dissociative behaviours similar to the avoidance and social exclusion forms of bullying that were perpetrated

against them. Engaging in such avoidance, even for self-preservation measures, likely worked to reinforce the idea that participants in the GSA were ‘others’ of a lower social status.

Likely to avoid ‘outing’ or the targeting of members, Leslie’s school LGBT club conducted meetings privately and students were emailed a location of the meeting so participation could remain confidential other than to those who attended. While well-intentioned, Leslie’s insights show how such alternatives also act to silence the issue and the members:

...the LGBT club that is anonymous, I think that’s good that it is, but at the same time, it kind of doesn’t encourage kids to...to be themselves in the greater majority, which is fine, as well like, I don’t know maybe having...like the option of maybe a club that wasn’t so secretive, maybe better because having it being secretive doesn’t really...help prevent bullying, because if anything, it kind of...makes it worse. Because you...you’re being told that you have to hide it, and that it’s a secret and that’s to avoid being bullied, so it’s kind of like, it’s kind of like rape culture where you’re telling girls to wear more clothes to avoid, when you should also be talking to the boys, or to the other people in this case.

Leslie did not clarify whether the decision to be anonymous was made by students or educators, but such attempts are again problematic in that it appears as though this sent the message that such identities were something that should be kept secret.

The effectiveness of GSAs in being a support for students appears to also be hindered when there is a lack of institutional support, as was expressed in several instances. For example, Allison and Taylor both explained how teachers at their schools were opposed to the GSA and were reported to have ripped down GSA posters. Because Allison was unaware of which teacher had ripped down the posters, they felt a sense of unease given this lack of support, which also felt like a form of indirect targeting. They explained: “I don’t know who was against us, but having...and not knowing...knowing that there’s somebody against you out there that’s older and has more authority, but not knowing who they were and not knowing who you should guard yourself against...”. In other cases, this opposition was more apparent, and students knew which teachers were opposed to such clubs. Peter explained that: “...there was one teacher that openly, um, disagreed



with the GSA. He was a big burly, he was actually a bodybuilder, um, and he openly didn't like the GSA. He would like make jokes about it in his classes and stuff, um, I'm not sure if he ever got in trouble for it". Another example was provided by Taylor who explained that "[The GSA was] supposed to have an assembly to talk about um, LGBT issues, but then the school basically said that wasn't important enough, so that was kind of a slap in the face..."

As a final example of schools 'missing the mark', Jennifer and Taylor both discussed the Day of Silence in their interviews. This appeared to be another instance where a diversity awareness initiative did not have as positive of an impact from the perspective of SGM individuals, as was likely intended. As Jennifer explained:

...we did the like Day of Silence at our school um, where you don't talk to show like, what it feels like to be gay and never be able to be open with people, except the problem being, I mean generally only people who are queer are doing that and they're already being oppressed like that so now it's just, okay good, the queer people aren't talking all day. Um, but I did do that like, in grade nine and ten before I decided, no, I'm going to be really vocal about issues on the Day of Silence.

From the above quotes, it appears as though there are sometimes implementation issues that go along with well-intentioned efforts to address GSB and promote SGM diversity. These efforts appear to translate into a failure to successfully address GSB, but also a failure to provide feelings of support for SGM individuals. Such failures are thus key areas that should be addressed in order to better assist in fostering support for SGM individuals, and also in the development of resilience.

### 6.6.6 Failing to Educate

The previous themes all tend to highlight the ways in which school contexts could better address GSB, and also provide a sense of support for students. The current theme of 'failing to educate' nonetheless appears to be the one that would have the greatest impact on providing the sense of support that students need to feel accepted, develop their identities, and appears to be the most connected to one's ability to 'own it' and thus mitigate the effects, if not challenge the occurrence of future instances of GSB.

Overwhelmingly, students expressed how they felt that schools had not provided them with a sense of understanding gender and sexual diversity. A few quotes represent this lack of diversity:

**Veronica:** “I don’t think sexuality was even barely touched at my school. I think they just assumed everybody was heterosexual.”

**Robert:** “Well...I mean for the most part teachers at my high school, I never heard them talk about ah, you know, any sexual minorities, not gays or lesbians, especially not transgender, like that of course, like, yeah, no one would ever talk about transgender people or anything like that but um, I guess, yeah, they were pretty silent I’d say on the issue...”

**Lauren:** “...there was never an emphasis on LGBT+ community, I don’t think I had a clue what transgender even meant. Even in grade eleven and twelve I don’t think I knew what that meant, I don’t think I’d ever heard about it or knew anybody. It was, it just wasn’t talked about, and I’m not saying it wasn’t talked about at all in high schools, it just wasn’t talked about in my experience. It was never talked about...being gay or, even in like health class, we talked a lot about like health class through gym in grade nine and ten, we talked a lot about heterosexual relationships and healthy sexual relations...but, [gay sexual relationships were] never talked about.”

Although some students did acknowledge that gender and sexual diversity was sometimes brought up, such inclusion was minimal, and often relegated to non-mandatory classes. For example, Taylor and Leslie explained:

**Taylor:** “...the only time they really talk about anything LGBT related is if it’s special topics on social issues in a class for something. Other than that, you maybe have one day of talking about it for an entire year in class.”

**Leslie:** “And the only, the only time we ever actually talked about it was in the gender course which you could opt to take, in which case we didn’t really discuss many genders either, we talked about like sexuality briefly, but it was mostly...it was more like a women’s studies course. Um, so it was pretty broad and general”

This limited inclusion suggests that although it might not have been completely absent, diversity was not something that was uniformly addressed, nor was it included in some of the more core classes. While such non-mandatory inclusion might benefit those with an already vested interest in the topic, it would certainly not go very far in educating those

peers who had an established negative perception of such diversity or those who did not participate in those particular electives. It may also have a limited effect on those students who did not know enough to search out such classes so they could learn about the identity differences that they may have been struggling with.

In contrast, Samantha provided an example of how such diversity could and should be included in everyday discussions, and not just in relation to instances of GSB, or on a case-by-case basis when educators thought that this information would be helpful:

But in terms of sexuality, like, if you've got posters up for prom, like, why are there no same sex couples on those posters, do you know what I mean? Um, if you have health class, like if you're teaching about STIs or whatever, like I hate to frame it through medical discourse, but if that is something you're talking about, use all types of pronouns, like, mix them all up. Don't always say "when the man is performing on a woman...", do you know what I mean? Because that really...whether you say like, "oh well they can extrapolate and kind of like imagine it within their own parameters...". No! Especially a lot of gay women feel completely immune to STIs and sexual assault, until it happens. So, just like, talking about it. No more elephant in the room. Read books about it in English, watch movies about it, remind people of the awful things that have happened to people in the past and like, make sure it's not becoming too homonormative, like make sure there's not too much erasure, in the sense of when you talk about queer people like, it's not always gay men that you're talking about, which is usually the way we frame anything. And those are usually the people that come forward and want to talk about these things, because they usually have the space for it. Like, you see queer men coming out in...on many platforms where they're already so successful due to male privilege, and due to their own merits as well, but I mean, they have that platform where a lot of women or a lot of trans folks, or others however they identify, um, they don't have as much of a platform. So, even if you don't want to speak for those people in your classrooms as an administrator, you do want to bring up their voices and don't think that there is nobody in the class who could speak to those experiences. That's another thing. When you're like "those lesbian people...", like I hate that. That's what they do all the time in classes. Because it's like, they're not those people up in the air, abstract, they're here, they're in your class, they're in your school.

Samantha's ideas again reflect the ways that educators can act now given the flexibility that they do have in terms of administering the curriculum. In this way, the topic can be discussed in a manner that integrates broader notions of human rights and such inclusion

would most likely be protected from parental challenges. Samantha's ideas also showcase how simple adjustments in the way that teachers phrase things could potentially have a great impact on students and their perceptions of the existence and acceptability of difference. This would also be necessary to ensure the inclusion of diversity does not reify notions of difference by reiterating the removed 'otherness' of such SGM populations.

Religion also appeared to be an influential factor that affected the inclusion of such topics. Patrick and Nathan both attended Catholic schools and explained how they thought this impacted such discussions of diversity or reinforced the heteronormative focus even more than in public schools.

**Patrick:** "...you don't get any education about anything, like it's...you don't get told that, that you can be with a guy, that's okay. You don't get told that in high school, that's not taught, especially not at a Catholic high school. They don't say you can't be with a guy, but they don't tell you that that's even an option..."

**Nathan:** "...I honestly think it's just part of going to a Catholic high school, you know, nowadays you see more of those LGBT alliances and stuff and the Gay-Straight Alliance, I never had that, there was never a source for that, it was very much, it was never talked about, and no one that knew what it was talked about it, it was considered taboo and it was never addressed. And there were many kids who I think, they struggled with that, and me personally too, but there really wasn't an outlet.

[...]

I talk about religion, but it is a huge impact. I know a lot of friends from Catholic high schools who I think, feel like, they did much worse than other schools, because again, the religion was very instilled on how they viewed the stance on it, you know? Even, you know, you could just tell it was a topic of taboo for a lot of people and it was just something that they never really wanted to address, so I...a lot of them suffered in silence, I guess, yeah."

Such religious influence appeared to reinforce the heteronormative assumptions present within Patrick and Nathan's schools.

Although both Patrick and Nathan expressed more negative feelings regarding the influence of religion, Andrew's recounting of their Catholic school experiences was slightly more positive, yet still reflects an overall failure to educate students about such difference:

Um, but no one ever, um, I guess, stifled me or anyone um, or even the topic. But I don't think it was really ever...brought up, or talked about.

[...]

Um, it was just never something that...was brought up or really talked about I guess. Um, I don't think the majority would I guess, um, I don't think they'd be opposed, or they would even support having that dialogue, but it was just never something that was initiated so I don't think they ever felt the need to initiate it.

Even though Andrew's experience suggests that while some of the more traditionally resistant school contexts may now be more willing to accept discussions of gender and sexual diversity than in the past, silence seems to be the dominant state unless someone specifically seeks to interrupt the quietness and initiate a more inclusive dialogue.

As suggested by Andrew, often discussions of diversity would need to be initiated by someone within that context. This places the onus on students or on the occasional educator to bring up such topics. This trend also appeared in the public-school contexts that participants discussed. As examples, Lauren and Leslie explained that:

**Lauren:** "I think...we didn't start learning about like different genders and sexuality until grade ten sex ed class. In which case we only addressed like, anything that wasn't like, heterosexual if somebody asked."

**Leslie:** "sexuality wasn't like, a topic that was addressed that much...it was more addressed by like teachers who were gay. And students who were gay. Generally not addressed by like, just like, supporters...supportive people or like, it just wasn't addressed enough."

In Samantha's case, there was an additional unwillingness of educators to allow students the opportunity to integrate such topics on their own accord:

I would want to write a paper on it, like on queerness related to whatever the topic we were discussing was, and they would shut that down, and just say ‘oh, we don’t do controversial this and that’.

Regardless of the passive or active exclusion of such topics, through the student accounts it appeared as though the limited inclusion of diversity contributed to the student perceptions that such topics were unwelcome and should not be broached. While the curriculum material has changed since these students were in (non-post-secondary) school, this also illuminates the potential weaknesses and neglect of the current curricular approach.

Unless students are willing to speak up and fight for the inclusion of topics of diversity at a time when they would find it useful, and unless the curriculum explicitly mandates the discussion of such topics, leaving it up to educators is likely to result in certain contexts that are likely to remain more silent, and thus more heteronormative, than others. This again reflects the traditional and broader understanding of schools as contexts that “...both reinforce and, at the same time, reflect mainstream normative genders and sexualities” (Khyatt, 2006, p. 135) which “...situates ‘normal life’ within the heterosexual – perpetuating heterosexism and homonegativity [and] positioning LGBTQI students as ‘the other’” (Vega, Crawford & Pelt, 2012, p. 253). This ‘failure to educate’ thus appears to set the (heteronormative) stage first for students and their understanding of themselves, but also for how students understand others and learn to not accept the differences of others. In the face of such ‘failure to educate’, students are left to struggle to determine their own understandings of self, and again, this was often influenced early on by the negative informal education provided by bullies.

## Chapter 7

### 7 Findings II: Educator Perspectives

#### 7.1 Participant Profile

Five interviews were conducted with educators who were currently employed in the Toronto District School Board (TDSB). As explained in the methods section, while the method of participant recruitment was not limited to the one school board, the intent was to focus on recruiting from the Toronto District School Board through relying on the use of key informants and passive snowball sampling to gather participants who would be working in an environment that has been known to be supportive of educators and school-based efforts to address issues with diversity and equity. For example, there is ample information online regarding the resources available to members of the TDSB showcasing how this particular school board is one of the leading and most resource-rich school boards in Canada when it comes to providing information and supports to educators regarding diversity (TDSB, 2014b). As such, drawing data from educators in this board means that it is possible to provide a more homogeneous policy context while also increasing the likelihood that educators are dealing with a heterogeneous student body. Such heterogeneity will help to illustrate some of the realistic challenges that educators are faced with on a daily basis when it comes to dealing with emerging student issues such as GSB and efforts to foster initiatives that aim to showcase and support diversity and acceptance.

The diversity of roles that participants played should be considered a strength of the current research. Of the five interviews that were conducted with educators, two were conducted with principals, two with teachers, and one interview was conducted with a school social worker. Thus, this stratified convenience sample helps to showcase insights from the different key stakeholders within school settings, and insights from those who are most likely to be faced with intervening in, and dealing with, instances of GSB.

Although the intention of the research was to focus on educators engaged with the middle school years (grades four to eight), due to the structure of schooling in Ontario and the

division between elementary, middle, and high schools, the educators interviewed here worked in schools that extended beyond the middle school grades. For example, the two principals both worked in schools that educated students between kindergarten to grade six, and the two teachers worked in a similar school context. The social worker also worked with students in the middle school grade range, as well as older high school students. Although this means that educators responsible for students in grades seven and eight were not interviewed, it does provide the opportunity for this research to highlight the realistic struggles of trying to address issues with students in the middle school grade range while in a school context that is also responsible for much younger students. Furthermore, by focusing on educators responsible for the early middle school years, it provides the opportunity to investigate the introduction stages of how schools incorporate discussions around gender and sexual diversity, and how the educators feel about the timing of such discussions.

A brief description of each participant is presented below. Participants are grouped according to the role that they held in the schools, with principals listed first, followed by teachers and then the school social worker. Again, pseudonyms are likely to suggest the gender of each participant, however gender-neutral language is intentionally used throughout this chapter to ensure that assumptions regarding gendered identities are not overly emphasized. Although this was a greater concern in the previous chapter as it was an attempt to respect the identities of students, continuing this practice in the subsequent chapter was seen as a way to reinforce the desire to not unnecessarily attribute particular gendered identities to participants.

### 7.1.1 Kathy

At the time of the interview, Kathy was a principal of a small elementary school. Prior to their 15-year tenure as principal, Kathy started out as a teacher and spent approximately a decade in that role prior to being promoted to vice-principal, a position that they held for four or five years. Kathy claimed that their promotion to administrative roles was the result of their desire to be a good teacher, which involved them taking additional training courses and their desire to work to support the school, rather than their classroom specifically. This training was further encouraged by the school principal they worked



for, who suggested that taking courses oriented towards principal training might open additional doors and make the transition easier if this was a career path that Kathy may eventually choose to pursue.

### 7.1.2 Janice

Janice was the principal of another small elementary school, and they explained that their current school context was similar to the three previous schools where they had worked. The desire to work in a leadership position came after Janice became more engaged in their own education and began to see the role of school administrator, or principal, as something that they would want to aspire to. Janice spent six years as a vice-principal before transitioning to principal. They explained during the interview that they had held the role of principal for approximately 16 years.

### 7.1.3 Cindy

Cindy was employed as a teacher of grade six students at a relatively large elementary school. Cindy had taught grade six students intermittently for approximately five years, although Cindy stated that they did not like to stay in the same grade for a long period of time and looked to switch grades every three years or so. Cindy felt that switching grades would keep their teaching from “getting stale” and they also enjoyed the challenge of dealing with different grades within the elementary context. Cindy admitted during the interview, however, that they were not interested in teaching older grades, such as seven and eight, and would prefer not to teach classes below the second-grade level, due to personal preference. For Cindy, teaching felt like a natural life-path after spending their early teen years working at jobs such as summer or leadership camps and other jobs that involved working with younger children.

### 7.1.4 Glenn

Glenn was the other teacher participant who was interviewed and also taught students in grade six, at the same elementary school as Cindy. Glenn had been teaching at that school for approximately 11 years. While Glenn had made a recent transition back to teaching grade six students after teaching students in younger grades, they had previously

taught grade six before in their 26 years as an educator. Similar to Cindy, Glenn admitted that they liked to switch between the grades they taught and admitted that doing so “keeps you fresher”. Teaching was somewhat of an expected career path for Glenn since their mother had been a teacher and thus, they had grown up around stories of teacher experiences. Furthermore, it seemed like a similar opportunity to the coaching that Glenn had previously done in their other jobs.

### 7.1.5 Sue

Sue brought a different perspective to the educator information. Employed as a school social worker responsible for dealing with six schools, Sue worked in the same area of the city as the previous educators, and in at least one of the same schools. Of the six total schools they were involved with, five were elementary and one was a high school. The other elementary schools where Sue worked also ranged from kindergarten to grade six.

Sue explained that their role is a partial clinical worker. Thus, a portion of their time is working one on one with children as well as their families, while the other portion of their time is spent on case management and consulting work. The consulting work would involve meeting with other educators to determine the best supports for students which are available through the educational system, but also whether there were any supports available through community agencies that would be beneficial.

Sue also explained that in any situation where they see and counsel students, they are required to have parental consent. They did, however, mention that there are opportunities to provide support to educators in an anonymous manner if a teacher approaches them with questions for how best to support a student that they may be having difficulties with.

Sue had been in their position for four years, and although they explained that they found it to be an interesting and enjoyable job where they enjoyed getting to work with students and their families, they admitted that it could often be quite stressful. This stress was mainly due to the caseload that they were responsible for on an annual basis. For example, Sue claimed that while they may start out the school year in September with a

clean slate, their workload increases rapidly throughout the academic year and by “...February onward I am running, you know, I don’t have breaks, I don’t have lunch, you know, it’s tense and it’s flurried”. Getting around ten referrals a month, Sue explained that by the end of the year they can have around a hundred cases. This was the part of the job that Sue admitted was slightly overwhelming and was thus the main downside to their job.

## 7.2 Overview of Findings

Findings from the educator interviews are divided into three sections. The first section highlights how the participants in this phase of the study understand GSB and what their experiences with GSB have been. The second section looks at the educator responses to the post-secondary student participant suggestions regarding how schools could better address GSB and challenge heteronormative school environments. The final section of this results chapter looks at the apparent obstacles or challenges that emerged during the interviews that might hinder the efforts of educators in implementing some of the suggestions that student participants had discussed, and in attempting to implement some of the existing TDSB and Ministry initiatives aimed at helping to address the issues of GSB and heteronormativity.

## 7.3 Educator Understandings of GSB

When it comes to thinking about the way that educators seemed to understand GSB, three themes stood out. The first theme is used to represent the recognition that this form of identity-based bullying is an important concern, and something that should be treated as bullying. This notion is followed up by the second theme which is given to represent the shared understanding that bullying is less of an issue than it once was, and the third theme represents the idea that GSB as a particular form of bullying was not something that the educators had experienced in their schools and that this would not be a likely problem they would encounter.

### 7.3.1 It's Bullying

When asked to describe what gender and sexuality-based bullying was, or what it looked like, the educators were clear to define behaviours that aligned with generic notions of bullying but stated that those behaviours would be tied to one's gender performance or their sexual orientation. In this sense, the educators appeared clear on their understandings of bullying, but then connected the notions of gender and sexuality in a more hypothetical sense.

Kathy, for example, defined gender or sexuality-based bullying as "...someone or a group of people trying to exercise control over someone or another group of people, um, based on their gender or based on their sexuality or sexual orientation". Janice defined gender and sexuality-based bullying as when "...students are being bothered in one way or another because of either their sexual orientation or their perceived sexual orientation, either the way they present themselves, or the way others perceive them". When asked to clarify what this may look like, both educators included examples of behaviours that ranged from verbal, to relational and indirect forms of bullying. Despite the diversity of behaviours that were explained, gender and sexuality remained a peripheral element that was not central to their explanations. Only Janice described witnessing some more direct forms such as "...name-calling, and um, laughing, snickering, again an exclusion, but sort of a targeted um, making fun of those people for whatever their perceived differences might be", but clarified that this was a rare occurrence.

The two teachers seemed less certain of how to specifically define bullying and were even less likely to conceptualize or convey an understanding of how sexuality or sexual orientation would be connected. Gender, however, was something that they could better see as a reason why someone may be a target for bullies. For example, when Glenn was asked to explain what gender or sexuality-based bullying meant, they explained it as "...stereotyping where people are sort of being pushed in a certain direction by their peers based on their gender, like what expectations are, they have certain expectations and to me that's what I'm thinking, but that may not be the actual definition of what it is". While Glenn's notion of 'expectations' can be connected to heteronormativity and gendered expectations, Glenn did not expand on what this would look like, or what those

expectations and stereotypes would consist of. Such connections were left unexplained and as more of an abstract element of bullying behaviour.

In defining their perception of GSB, Sue explained that gender-based bullying is when individuals experience harassment because:

...they are not fitting this kind of you know, gender stereotype right, so kids who, that you know, boys who show more interest in or have more feminine tendencies, the girls who are more kind of tom boyish and have more

[...]

interests that are more, stereotypically male, so I mean, when I look at that age category, it's like the kids who don't fit that stereotype of what their gender is, you know, predetermined to be.

When asked more specifically about how sexuality may be incorporated, Sue articulated that this form of bullying could involve "...a child being harassed and negatively targeted based on how they express their sexuality, and then in a non-heterosexist kind of way". Thus, much like the teacher understandings, gender appears to dominate Sue's perceptions of GSB.

The theme of 'it's bullying' is therefore intended to represent the tendency of participants to focus on more generic notions of bullying, rather than understanding GSB as something that was integrally tied to understandings of gender and sexuality. In this manner, the theme reflects the tendency throughout the interviews for participants to discuss bullying in a more general sense, where notions of gender and sexuality were sometimes tied in, usually only when participants were specifically asked or questioned about this.

As such, while the educators recognized that bullying based on one's gender or sexuality was negative, there was little said that would indicate that they actively distinguish or treat it differently from other or general forms of bullying. This suggests that educators may not be aware of how being targeted based on one's identity could potentially be more harmful or have more devastating consequences (as suggested by the participants and the earlier cited literature) than the more general forms of bullying that they

discussed. Nonetheless, such attitudes suggest that this behaviour would simultaneously not be minimized or downplayed. Educators were also clear to indicate throughout their interviews that any bullying behaviour, regardless of what it involved or was based on, was a serious issue that needed to be addressed. The theme of ‘it’s bullying’ is thus intended to represent this notion of absolute certainty shared by participants that any behaviours that could be reduced to bullying were to be understood as unacceptable. Furthermore, despite often not being able to clearly articulate examples of GSB, the educators unanimously expressed the idea that this would be something that they would respond to if they ever saw it.

### 7.3.2 Better Than Before

The second theme that summarizes how participants understood bullying and GSB, is the notion that as the result of cultural change and increased attention and supports by schools and educational districts, things are ‘better than before’. As part of this shift, policy changes were framed as beneficial in that they allowed educators a greater opportunity to address this issue. Simultaneously, policies also opened up an avenue for encouraging educators who may have held more ‘outdated’ heteronormative or homophobic perspectives to make sure that schools were safe and accepting spaces, regardless of their personal views. Quotes by Janice and Sue are given as illustrative of this theme:

**Janice:** “I’m not seeing [gay used in a derogatory tone] nearly as much, or hearing that term nearly as much, and I’m not seeing it nearly as much in the K to six school, or with my juniors if we’re focusing on those four to sixes

[...]

I think that...students are using a new language and we’re seeing better models and that, we’re talking about it more openly as a culture, not necessarily in the schools but in the everywhere else, where being...the whole idea of being gay is no longer perceived as something to laugh or snicker at, it’s rather ‘oh, my mom is gay’ or ‘my auntie’s gay’ where it’s more a matter of fact, kind of info piece now so it’s nothing to be able to use as a weapon, a tool to say ‘oh you’re so gay’ [...]

I think the perception and the definition generally has changed about that term”.

**Sue:** “I think you know there is a lot more awareness staff wise, of the supports that should be in place to help students accept their own being and express who they are and be comfortable with whatever their identity is

[...]

I find some staff more receptive than others, there’s still people with very, kind of traditional, old school fashioned and homophobic perspectives, right, and so it’s a process to help them but I do feel like that policy wise it has come a long way to kind of at least having a bit of a backup so

[...]

there is at least a policy that kind of defends the rights of students.”

Despite highlighting the improvements that have occurred, the above quotes suggest that schools still have work to do to address this issue. For example, Janice’s quote was preceded with the idea that GSB still manifests in students being excluded or bullies laughing and snickering, and although the use of explicit homophobic epithets has lessened over time, this does not refute the reality that it still occurs. Further, Sue’s comment that there are individuals in the school environment who are resistant to institutional changes reinforces the idea that anti-bullying policies are only as good as their implementation.

### 7.3.3 It Doesn’t Really Happen Here

While educators were willing to admit that there may be issues of bullying that would occur in their school contexts, overall the tendency was to claim that serious forms of bullying and sexuality-based bullying in particular were not issues that they had or would encounter at their schools. The main reasons given for this reduced likelihood included the size of the school and the age of the students they were responsible for.

In terms of school size, Kathy explained:

So we’re a pretty small school. I can’t say that there’s no bullying happening, but not to the um, I think not to the extent that you hear bullying stories in the media. So I don’t think that we have anything like

that. Um, and again, I think it's in the older grades that you see more ah, extensive, um, extensive is not the word, but um, more incidents of bullying at an extreme level.

The greater prevalence of bullying in larger schools was also something that Janice expressed through the comparison they made between their current situation and their previous experience as a vice-principal at a larger middle-school. Janice stated:

...as one vice-principal in a school of six hundred kids, I just, I remember feeling really overwhelmed that I wasn't...I was dealing with the bullies and there was very little time to be supportive to the bullied.

Such ideas from both Janice and Kathy appear to contradict existing research as research suggests that larger social settings with greater numbers of students tends to correlate with lower levels of bullying (Garandeau, Lee & Salmivalli, 2014), and smaller schools have been found to have higher rates of bullying (Klein & Cornell, 2010). While it is not possible to determine the extent of bullying and conclude whether or not their schools are reflective of the trends that have been found elsewhere, it is beneficial to consider a few points about this contradiction.

First, both Kathy and Janice expressed their hands-on approach, explaining how they are quite involved in everyday interactions in their schools. Their educator style thus may not only give them the confidence to assert that bullying is not an issue that occurs as often as in other schools, but it may also be an accurate reflection of the empirical reality where there is less bullying in their schools. Such a reality may not be something that is reflective of or generalizable to other small school contexts though.

Second, one can reflect on the idea that difference has been given as a justification for bullying (Thornberg, 2015). In smaller schools where this diversity is lacking, differences between students that could be used to justify bullying may become more evident. This may help to explain the research findings that support an increased likelihood of bullying in those contexts. Given that the smaller schools where Kathy and Janice worked were located within the TDSB however, the likelihood of encountering a diverse student population even within small schools is increased from other school districts that may have a more homogeneous overall population. Such diversity may thus



have an impact on the extent to which difference is seen as something that bullies can use, and therefore on the extent of bullying within such contexts.

Furthermore, as shown in the previous quotes by Kathy and Janice, the age of students also factored into the perception that bullying would not be a significant issue. For example, Kathy explained that while they were often faced with minor instances of exclusion or making fun of someone, bullying did not occur:

In my experience it hasn't happened overtly where they're fighting about something, they might call someone names and it might come to me, but nothing really really big. I think it's because probably I'm in elementary. I'm sure that that snowballs when it's like middle school, high school...

Expanding on this further, Kathy explained that bullying would also not occur since differences between students are not likely to be prevalent until students are older:

I think that the...kid's maturity level sometimes, they just want to play. It doesn't matter who they're playing with, they just want to play and so they don't start to see kind of differences I think as much as when you start to get a bit older, a little bit more mature, you can see when you're successful or not successful, whereas kids sometimes don't see that if they're playing and they're um, playing football...they just like to play or if they're drawing, they just like to draw. But I think when they get older, they start to know what they're good at and what they're not good at, they start to see groups starting to form

[...]

they don't fit in, and I think that they start to see the differences between people, and I think that's kind of where it starts.

Although Kathy implies that differences are more likely to appear in older grades, the student interviews in the preceding chapter suggested otherwise, as participants felt that they were called out for their non-conformity early in their schooling. This contradiction highlights the importance of trying to determine when perceptions of difference emerge for students, and also whether or not this aligns with educator perspectives.

In addition to explaining why severe bullying would not occur, age was also a reason for why sexuality-based bullying would not be something that the educators in this study would need to be overly concerned with. This notion was expressed most clearly by

Cindy: "...they are at the age, you know, where you know it's not as prevalent obviously, grade six, it's grade six. It's not going to happen". In contrast, Cindy indicated that such issues would be more likely to occur in grades seven and eight when students notice more about their changing bodies and their attractions to other individuals, further explaining that "...that's where it comes in. But it's not big here. That's why I won't go into grade seven and eight. I don't want to deal with that" and "...if I were a high school teacher I would have a lot more to add but honestly, it's like we don't deal with that...".

Sue, the social worker, also made comments in their interview that suggested that issues around sexuality would not likely be something that students in middle school grades would face:

I mean it's premature for them to identify maybe as gay or lesbian or bisexual

[...]

they're not in a sexual stage of their life and yes they are in some ways, sorry, but let me backtrack, you know I think labels can be confusing and they are not in that identity formation stage...

Such educator beliefs differ from the student findings that indicated students may at least be grappling with SGM identity issues, if not fully accepting or coming to adopt those identities. Furthermore, this runs counter to the student experiences which highlighted how more generalized notions of difference in relation to the heteronormative and gender binary expectations were expressed and enforced in the middle school grades.

Ultimately, denying that sexuality is an issue for younger students also overlooks, and serves to reinforce, the heteronormative assumptions and mechanisms of enforcement that are present in schools (e.g. Mellor & Epstein, 2006).

Thus, what this section suggests is that while bullying is seen as an important issue for educators to deal with, understandings of the severity of non-physical and identity-based forms of bullying may be downplayed or underestimated by educators. For example, while educators did bring up a few situations where gender was the reason for bullying, this appeared to be framed as an uncommon occurrence, and something that was not considered to be 'severe'. Furthermore, although most participants did not explicitly

state that sexuality-based bullying would never occur in their schools and in the grades that they were involved with, from their above quotes and their tendency to refer to general forms of bullying throughout the interviews, it seems as though sexuality-based bullying is something that the educators in this study would not expect to see given the size and age composition of the schools. If educators are thus not on the lookout for this particular behaviour, they may be less likely to notice it when it does occur, or less willing to engage in preventative initiatives that may work to prevent this behaviour or help develop resilience and feelings of support for those who may still encounter it.

## 7.4 Responding to the Student Comments

Student ideas for how schools could better deal with the issue of GSB were grouped according to common suggestions, and then integrated into the educator interview schedules. The comments from the student interviews focused on three main areas including dealing with this form of bullying; the absence of topics of gender and sexual diversity from educational content; and issues around the school climate. Subtopics within each of the three areas were also identified. Such sub-comments included: the need for more resources for educators who might not know how to intervene in cases of GSB; the need for educators to address the underlying attitudes and beliefs rather than the behaviour itself; identifying that the 2015 revised Health and Physical Education curriculum was a step in the right direction, but suggesting that there is a need for a greater integration of discussions of non-heterosexual relationships as well as the need to do so in areas not related to Health or in earlier years such as middle school. Furthermore, students identified that having groups such as GSAs would be beneficial, along with physical markers of safe spaces or displays related to gender and sexuality within the school environment. Lastly, students identified the need to ensure that all school staff are supportive of gender and sexual diversity, rather than part of the problem when they themselves made derogatory comments or jokes.

In their interviews, the educators were presented with these themes, suggestions, or comments about the students' experiences and then asked to respond. The intent behind this was mainly to determine whether the supports that students found helpful or their suggested changes were already being implemented in the middle school context, and if

not, whether the educators thought such changes could be integrated or whether they felt there would be barriers that would impede the implementation. Based on the comments that educators made in response, and based on other comments made throughout their interviews, two main themes emerged that indicate how educators felt about responding to GSB and also making changes within the school environment that might help students come to understand sexual and gender diversity and feel supported in their school environments.

#### 7.4.1 Duty to Respond and Getting to the Root of the Issue

Unanimously, educators agreed that something needs to be done when the students are being bullied, regardless of the reasons for which they are targeted. They also felt that it is the duty of educators to be the ones to respond in instances of bullying, but that it is also their duty to encourage others, such as bystanders, to intervene and educate students about the issue and implications of bullying. Once again though, the comments that educators made in terms of responding to bullying tended to reflect a more generic non-identity based notion of bullying rather than GSB specifically.

In terms of identifying their duty to respond, Janice claimed that:

...I feel as the principal it's one of my biggest responsibilities to keep students safe and when a student is being bullied they are not safe [...] because without kids coming to school and feeling safe, then there's no learning, there's no point in us even coming here.

The other participants as well (with the exception of Sue who was not responsible for intervening directly in instances of bullying, but responded and dealt with the perpetrators and targets after the fact) identified that addressing bullying behaviour was part of their job, but also felt that it was their responsibility to do so in a way that attempted to get at the root of the issue. Even before discussing the student suggestions for responses to GSB, the educators in this study identified how they found it was important to do more than simply admonish the behaviour and immediately move on from the situation. Kathy even pulled out resources that they used to illustrate the recommended strategies for dealing with bullying. Kathy explained:

I have like a ten minute ‘how to deal with something in five or ten minutes’ [pulls out binder to show resource to interviewer], and it basically just says, address the issue, don’t skirt around it, address the issue... ‘I heard you say...that does not show respect. Please don’t say that again and can you please apologize for the behaviour’. So, you’re addressing what you don’t like about what they’ve done, um you’ve told them don’t do it again, and then you’ve asked them to fix the situation.

The teachers as well indicated that they would engage in attempts to find out what is going on, or to have the bullies recognize the implications of their actions. For example:

**Cindy:** “If I do have any wind of it, I try to erase it right away. And the way I do that is we have a discussion. I don’t say ‘Stop doing that!’, we want to get to the root of it, get a bit of a history and find out, you know, what’s going on.”

**Glenn:** “...just making the people who are bullying realize that hey, look at what you’re doing. Try to have some empathy for the victim...and ah, yeah, just have them have empathy for the victim and look at the impact it has on the victim, but also hear, it comes down to, these are the consequences for doing it, like you know, if you continue with this, this is what’s going to happen

[...]

but if it’s gender related, if someone was say being called ah, you know, a slang term for a homosexual or something like that, that’s where you have to go right, you know, and talk about how inappropriate this is and really find out why you know, where did you hear this term, where are you hearing this sort of thing...”

Thus, it is promising that the educators in this study recognized the need to move beyond addressing only the negative behaviour and made attempts to get to the root of any bullying behaviour that they did encounter.

Overall though, the examples of how educators would attempt to get to the root of the problem were given in the context of generic forms of bullying, and so, aside from Glenn’s interview, there were few examples provided that would illustrate how educators would attempt to deal with bullying centered around issues of gender or sexuality and how they may respond if this was identified as the root of the issue. Given that this verbal targeting and use of homophobic epithets was such a common element of the student experiences discussed in the previous chapter, Glenn’s planned intervention

strategies seem to be in line with what students felt would be useful and what they wished their teachers had done in the face of the bullying they witnessed or experienced directly.

Unfortunately, getting to the root of the issue is unlikely to occur if educators are prevented from intervening in instances of GSB. As the student interviews suggested, non-reporting of bullying occurred for various reasons, and thus educators were not always aware of the bullying that was ongoing. Additionally, if educators hold the belief that such GSB would not occur in their school contexts (as illustrated above), this raises the question of whether the educators are fully prepared to engage in the dialogue necessary to get at the root of the issue when it comes to GSB, and furthermore, what this would look like if they are trying to engage in ‘age-appropriate’ conversations regarding such topics. For example, Cindy expressed some reluctance or uncertainty in how they would respond to sexuality-based bullying:

...the sexuality one would be really difficult for me. I would rather have someone who, you know, knows the language and how to deal with that. It's very sensitive right? A kid's dealing with all that kind of stuff. It's hard for just a teacher in grade six dealing with all the other issues in the class. So, I would probably send that to administration. I mean I would never just take a backseat to it either. I would still want to be involved. Find out how it was resolved, what did you do, so if it was to happen again in my class, I would have an idea of where to start. I think those are the ones I think I would be more concerned about because, again, I have never had to deal with them.

Thus, the above quotes suggest that the educators in this sample would see it as their responsibility to intervene and try to get to the root of the issue, which was seen as a step in the direction of what student participants called for in terms of educator interventions. Simultaneously, their lack of experience in dealing with GSB, and their assumptions about the likelihood of it occurring leave further questions about what such efforts would entail, and how prepared educators may actually be for dealing with such issues when they arise in a middle-school context.

#### 7.4.2 Tentative Agreement

In considering the responses that educators had to the other suggestions about how schools could better educate and foster cultures of acceptance when it comes to gender

and sexual diversity, the theme of tentative agreement can be used to summarize how educators often saw the suggestions as good ideas and recognized the necessity of expanding discussions of gender and sexuality, but were overall hesitant to suggest that such initiatives could successfully be implemented in their school contexts.

In terms of the specific solutions or changes that were recommended, it was suggested in many of the student interviews that participants strongly supported the revised Health and Physical Education curriculum and believed that it would enable educators to integrate discussions of gender and sexuality in middle school grades. These discussions would then assist students in understanding their difference, and also in understanding that sexual and gender diversity could be framed in a positive light. Because of this, educators were asked about their experiences in implementing this version of the curriculum and whether or not they felt that it allowed for discussions to happen early enough.

Teachers and principals explained that they had implemented the curriculum in the previous academic year and saw it as a good resource, despite the parental opposition that they encountered. Thus, agreement was evident in the ways that educators described their defense of the curricular changes and recognized that much of the disagreement with the curriculum was an overreaction or was rooted in misinformation about what was being said in the classrooms and about what students would be learning. Kathy's interview provided a quote that summarized this idea well:

I think for the community, it's a little bit of a jump in terms of what the curriculum was before and what it is now, and I think that the media really has um, taken lots of pieces of the curriculum out of context and um, I think that negative light has kind of shone poorly on the whole curriculum itself, but I think the curriculum is good.

Furthermore, Janice explained that many of the concepts covered in the 2015 Health and Physical Education curriculum were those that had been taught all along, but it was the parental and community reaction to misinformation about revisions that they often had to deal with. Janice also felt that this opposition contributed to an outright refusal of the curriculum as a whole. As Janice explained:

...because we've been teaching many of those concepts all along and those same parents haven't been at my door all those years, but all of a sudden they are saying they don't want to have sex ed taught at all. And the primary parents I found that came to see me were really uncomfortable in hearing that we could possibly refer to the fact that someone has a family with two dads. Or two moms. They were not prepared to let their child know that that was a reality. And then in the junior grades...it was similar kinds of experiences of examples.

[...]

Therefore, parents are ruling it out entirely instead of this whole general message getting across to the kids.

Thus, when it came to understanding how the curriculum went over with educators, with the exception of having to deal with the parental and community response to the curriculum changes, it appeared that for the most part their experience with the curriculum appeared to be 'business as usual'. It is possible that this is due to the flexibility there is in implementing the curriculum. Unless changes are made explicitly to the learning objectives, or the grade expectations, teachers can continue to choose to integrate the suggested materials as they wish, or only deal with the comments raised by students. Without such mandated changes, there is the potential that educators may vary little in how they approach the material from one year to the next.

One of the key comments made by students was that their exposure to topics of diversity had not occurred early enough. Given that the implemented 2015 curriculum included topics of diversity in the middle school range, the teachers were also asked to respond to this idea and whether or not they thought discussions about gender and sexual diversity were taking place early enough. Despite the parental opposition that they had to deal with and their experiences with the curriculum, it was expressed that the educators felt discussions were not always taking place early enough. As Janice indicated:

I'm going to say probably [discussions of gender and sexuality differences do not take place early enough], but I don't know how to approach them age-specifically yet...that we could put into a document and that would be passed. So, to answer your question, no, I don't think they start taking place soon enough, I think it's getting better, but probably it could be sooner.



While it was generally expressed by all of the educators that the earlier those discussions happened the better it would be for fostering notions of acceptance amongst students, aside from how the topics were addressed in the curriculum the educators appeared uncertain as to how discussions could be implemented earlier. Kathy expressed this idea:

The kids are quite young and how you approach it is I think important. It's progressive, so I think that kind of where they start with grade one and that example, is a good example of starting where you're respecting all people. I don't know how that would look kind of, going down to grade four to six, I'm not sure what it is...what the discussion would be. So it's hard for me to be able to articulate...

The two teachers seemed the most reluctant to integrating discussions earlier than what was outlined for them in the curriculum, and further expressed the need to rely on expert opinion:

**Glenn:** "...once the kids are passed primary, like I mean it's a maybe a difficult concept for the younger kids to grasp, but yeah

[...]

then you're creating acceptance or you're more likely to have accepting students if it's talked about at an earlier age and not suddenly dropped on them later

[...]

I think grade four or five, there's a maturity level that kids need before you start talking about it."

**Cindy:** "...it is a great idea, I think we have to be careful what age that happens, um, I don't think...for my bias grade six is a bit too soon. Cause they are just trying to figure out what they are up to with the whole puberty changes and the changes in their body first. I think we might confuse them a little bit with all the different issues that come up, so I think that a certain age absolutely. I'm not sure grade six is the time.

[...]

younger is better but I think that we have to, kind of tread lightly and we need expert opinion about child development and when we think that is most appropriate, um, but I agree the younger the better so it becomes a normal, a normal sort of situation that everyone goes through."

The unsurety and deference to other expert authorities indicated in the above quotes highlights the possibility that educators may be unsure of how to broach topics of gender and sexual diversity with their students, outside of what is explicitly included in the curriculum. Such information thus points to the necessity of having a curriculum that is inclusive of topics of gender and sexual diversity, and one that demonstrates to educators the ways in which such conversations can be included in an age-appropriate manner. Nonetheless, this also highlights the importance of having a curriculum that accurately reflects the issues that students are dealing with at different age levels, for example, at a time when GSB is likely to occur, and when students may begin to start targeting others based on perceived differences of gender and sexuality. For example, if educators are unsure of how to approach such diversity-based discussions with students in the middle school grade range given omissions in the curriculum, or given a lack of educator-training outside of the curriculum, they may also be underprepared to fully address the attitudes and beliefs that underlie GSB, and may thus not be able to ‘get at the root of the issue’ when intervening in GSB related incidents.

In many ways, this theme also suggests how a reactive approach dominated educator discussions when it came to their responses to student suggestions of educational changes that could better promote understandings of gender and sexual diversity. Comments were made that indicate the educators would accommodate if students brought up such issues, but the participants expressed limited attempts to foster such discussions independent of student concerns. For example, Janice discussed how the practice of open-ended inquiry could provide an avenue for students to explore the topic of such diversity outside of the Health and Physical Education curriculum. Janice explained:

...when we do open-ended inquiry and we make a safe environment, then students who have an interest could be, interested in doing that kind of inquiry into women’s rights or GBLT or any of those, you know those kinds of things. I think when we lean towards more open-ended inquiry and then creating that safe environment at the same time, it may lead to students choosing um, having more choice and voice in what we study.

Similarly, both Janice and Kathy both used the example of how students may discuss having a non-traditional family type (e.g. a family with two fathers) and promoted this as

a way that they could integrate discussions and teach other students about respect for such diversity at an age-appropriate level. Ultimately, such approaches remain reactive as it leaves it up to the students to integrate those topics. None of the educators discussed examples where they proactively integrated discussions of gender and sexual diversity, and none of the educators raised examples of other educators they knew who did so in the middle-school context either. Given that this was a key concern expressed by the students in the previous chapter, this is a concerning finding insofar as it suggests efforts may often be left up to students to incorporate into their education, or that such discussions only take place when educators perceive a need for such based on situations that may arise in the school.

This same tentative agreement extended to other initiatives that students proposed, such as making supports of gender and sexual diversity (i.e. posters or rainbow flags) visible throughout the school, or for providing student-based clubs that would address diversity (i.e. GSAs). While the educators overall felt that such supports for students were beneficial, none of the educators expressed that those opportunities to showcase diversity were being implemented in their schools. Janice was the only participant who expressed the potential for having a group such as GSA in the school but expressed that that they did not believe that there would be a teacher willing to take on the responsibility of forming and overseeing such a group, although they did admit that they had not asked anyone to do so. Additionally, although Janice mentioned having benches outside of classroom that were known in the school as being ‘safe spaces’ where students could go and discuss things openly, this initiative was not related to gender or sexuality specifically.

In general, while the educators often saw the value in such programs and markers of acceptance, there was simultaneous resistance to the idea that these changes could be implemented in the school contexts of participants. For example, Kathy expressed that such initiatives could be integrated into middle schools with older students. Thus, age again appears to be a factor whereby such initiatives were not seen as particularly beneficial or necessary for those students in a kindergarten to grade six school.

In the case of Glenn and Cindy, reluctance for integrating such measures stemmed from the perception and concern for parental opposition. Cindy expressed the idea of a ‘school bubble’ several times in the interview, and saw such changes as potentially affecting the ‘delicate balance’ between what the schools attempted to implement and what the parents would be willing to allow. Cindy explained:

I just think the culture in the community...it would be dodgy for sure. I think we would scare more parents away. I think that as a culture, as a community, as parents...the principal has a very good relationship with them and if that was ever going to happen she would have to go through the parent council and see how they feel about it and we probably already know the answer.

Although Glenn expressed a general reluctance on the part of the school to engage in activities that would upset the balance, they argued that parental opposition is not something that should be allowed to dictate what would happen in the school:

I don’t think the community should have any impact among us.

[...]

You’re going to have upset [parents], but you know, that’s policy and it should be. It’s equality, you know, protecting the rights of everyone.

The above quotes thus highlight a tension that exists for schools and educators who have to navigate a mandate of ensuring schools are inclusive and accepting for SGM students, while also balancing the everyday need to remain respectful towards parental opinions and beliefs in order to support a good working relationship between the school and the parent community. Much like Glenn suggested, although it remained clear throughout the interviews that parental resistance would not inhibit educators from defending the curriculum, acting to intervene in instances of GSB, or defending the rights of SGM individuals when students identify as SGM, such actions again are indicative of more reactive measures. As such, it appears as though the tension that exists may work to inhibit the extent of more preventative and proactive measures that schools may engage in that could work in a preventative manner to support SGM students and foster resilience.

Based on the data presented in this section, it is clear that when it comes to bullying, including GSB, educators are aware of their responsibility to respond, and at least in this group, appear willing to do more than address the behaviour and instead engage in measures that will help get to the root of the problem. Unfortunately, when it comes to efforts to implement changes that are likely to proactively support SGM students and help foster resilience, educators are in favour although cautious or uncertain about implementing changes in earlier contexts involving students in the middle school years. Themes that identify the main challenges that educators voiced or were drawn from the educator data are discussed in the next section.

## 7.5 Challenges for Anti-Bullying and Diversity Initiatives

This section highlights the main challenges in terms of addressing GSB and implementing diversity initiatives that emerged from the interviews with educators.

Three themes were identified. The first theme illustrates how educators are unlikely to know about all instances of bullying. This again showcases the importance of engaging in initiatives that will help foster student resilience to allow them to overcome some of the negative effects of bullying that may likely go unaddressed by educators.

Furthermore, gender and sexuality specific intervention language was identified as something that was potentially lacking from both the anti-bullying initiatives that were ongoing in schools, and the toolkit that educators would be able to rely on when engaging in diversity initiatives that may be challenged by parents and the community. Thus, providing intervention language was the second theme that was identified. Finally, the need to consider the parents once again emerged as being the clearest hurdle that educators in this study perceived both in terms of dealing with bullying, providing support to students, and also in acting as a force that inhibited the ability of educators to implement initiatives that would likely have a preventative and resilience-building impact.

### 7.5.1 We Don't Always Know

Overall, the educators in this study expressed the belief that bullying has received greater attention in recent years and has been constructed as an issue that has clear negative

consequences and should thus be addressed. This included the need to respond to instances of GSB, should they arise. On the other hand, the realization that educators may not always be aware of the bullying that goes on in the school environment was also expressed in the educator interviews as the following quotes show:

**Glenn:** “I do think the situation occurs all the time where...there’s bullying going on and the teacher’s not aware of it. For certain. Whether they should be or not, and in a lot of cases, I mean it’s very subtle. I mean I’ve had situations where I’ve had children that I thought were wonderful kids, and then as the year progressed I found out what was going on behind the scenes and you know they were presenting themselves to me in one light and yet they were doing all sorts of mean little things to people behind my back, out at recess, and nobody told me...”

**Cindy:** “That’s the thing about bullying. They’re so good at hiding it. That you don’t know. And ironically enough, two days ago I asked another class, ‘Why is it so hard for us teachers to figure out what’s going on with you guys?’ and the kids were like ‘‘Cause we know how to hide it really well’’”

Cindy further emphasized the need to be able to understand students and their interactions with peers so that more subtle forms of bullying could be identified:

I think there are sometimes when you are not really sure whether they are being sarcastic or whether something, um, the group sort of has an understanding about. [...] so maybe this sarcasm is really something that is hurtful and, it’s hard to know the difference. Especially when you’re dealing with, let’s say you have six table groups, so every interaction is going to be different. When, as a teacher, when do you know if it is bullying or when do you know it’s not?

While the educators focused explaining their lack of knowing on the bullies and their ability to hide their behaviour, the lack of willingness to report being the target of bullying (as expressed in the previous chapter) further substantiates the reality that educators are not always going to know when bullying is ongoing.

As previously expressed, the principals both indicated adopting a more hands-on approach in their schools and discussed how they routinely interacted with the students on an everyday basis. Despite this level of involvement, Karen and Janice both recognized that they did not always know everything that was going on in their school.

Furthermore, they highlighted some potential issues with their ability to classify behaviour as bullying when they might not be aware of the whole situation. In their interview, Janice expressed the need to do an investigation before any label can be applied to a student's behaviour. Kathy also explained how they need to find sufficient evidence to proceed with a situation as an instance of bullying and how this is certainly easier for some forms of bullying than others:

Physical is obvious. So physical probably is the biggest one [that they would intervene with], and then it's hard for all the other pieces, you'd have to be able to witness it, see it, or have evidence of it, so most of the things that happen within the school need to be evidence-based and some things are not evidence-based. It's how that person's feeling, and um, they may be excluded but I can't prove someone is doing something overt, so those are harder to um, to help with but the physical is obviously easy. Anything that is evidence-based is easy for us to intervene in.

This evidence-based requirement when it comes to the labelling and policing of bullying behaviour highlights another apparent tension that educators have to navigate when it comes to dealing with GSB. On the one hand, educators have a responsibility to identify and intervene in instances of bullying. Insofar as bullying remains hard for educators to identify, students actively work to hide this behaviour from educators, and targets of bullying experience this on a perceptual level, bullying is likely to remain an issue that educators are able to deal with in a limited-sense, despite their best of intentions. Additionally, given the burden of proof necessary for educators to police ongoing bullying behaviour, this appears to limit the extent to which bullying can be formally labelled and dealt with as such. While this certainly does not negate the potential for educators to intervene and deal with problematic behaviours on an informal and individual basis, it does again reinforce the need to ensure students are given the tools and support necessary to overcome bullying when educator intervention is restricted by these realities and requirements.

### 7.5.2 Lacking Intervention Language

In many instances, educators spoke about the need to educate students about the issue of bullying, and to also inform them of their roles as bystanders who would be able to help identify and intervene by bringing the issue to the attention of teachers. This was

particularly prevalent within the interviews with principals who both explained their efforts to bring presentations or workshops into the school that would help students learn about bullying and also learn what to do if they witnessed it. For example, Janice described the *Power of One* presentation that they had used a few times in their school:

they had a dramatic presentation where they identified all the terms so that the kids knew and when they came to me, they said, 'I was the bystander'

[...]

and then I'd say 'What's your responsibility if you're the bystander then?'

[...]

My purpose of having those broad-based kinds of opportunities is to create a definition and a dialogue, so it usually goes, it goes back with some sort of an activity, that goes back to the classroom where you can have more of a community conversation

[...]

I don't really have...expect those broad-based assemblies to change the behaviour in somebody who is going to do that. I really am focusing on the bystanders and possibly the victims. People know what to do if this happens, um, going forward. Giving them some tools and communication.

This focus on understanding roles and having the language to communicate what was going on was important since Janice felt that:

Sometimes the person who is bullying doesn't even realize that, what kind of bullying, they don't even know the name of it, they might not even know they're bullying. They might not even realize that their behaviour fits our description, so I think it's really important to label it and I think it's very important to label it with the parents as well.

While educators thus explained that efforts were being made to define the roles involved with bullying, and to define particular behaviours as bullying, there was a general gap whereby this information was not related to issues of gender or sexuality. This does not mean that such issues might not be broached during the presentations, but when asked whether there were any initiatives that targeted GSB specifically, educators stated that this was not the case, and they were unable to provide any examples of when GSB was integrated into other anti-bullying presentations. Nonetheless, even if initiatives are not



specific to this form of bullying, if students are unsure about whether their behaviour constitutes bullying, and perhaps are of the mindset that they are merely enforcing the normative and correct moral order (as suggested by Davies, 2011) through their behaviour, they may fail to recognize the harmful nature of their actions or classify those efforts as bullying. This idea bears similarity to the perspective of students who often expressed that the bullies themselves did not understand their own behaviours or the implications of their actions.

Despite the stress that educators placed on the importance of providing such language to students, it became apparent during the interview and transcription process that the educators themselves may also be lacking the language necessary to effectively deal with GSB. This was suggested in the way that educators sometimes struggled to come up with the words to describe their ideas, or to discuss the issues of gender and sexuality. Furthermore, there sometimes appeared to be a lack of confidence in their knowledge of such issues. For example, there were a few instances where each participant seemed afraid of saying the wrong thing or using the wrong phrasing. Although this idea is more evident in what was not said, the long pauses during the interviews, or when statements tapered off short of providing a full explanation of their point, Cindy's quote (cited earlier in the Duty to Respond and Getting to the Root of the Issue section) provides a good example of this idea. In the quote, Cindy explained how they did not have a handle on the language since this was an issue that they had never dealt with before and would thus likely defer to the administration since they were not an expert on the issue. Other quotes used earlier in this chapter to demonstrate that educators felt unsure about how to integrate discussions of gender and sexual diversity in an age-appropriate manner (outside what was already addressed in the curriculum) further support this unfamiliarity with language and approaches that would be useful for addressing GSB.

Furthermore, educators admitted that they were not as well versed in the provincial or district policies as what they should be, and in some cases, this reflected their understanding of the language that could be used when dealing with instances of GSB. When asked about their familiarity with the Ministry based policies that would be relevant for dealing with GSB, Janice explained:

Probably not as familiar, I can't quote any of the numbers or what I get it from. I know where to go and find it, I know that they're constantly sending out new and revised, not necessarily policies, but um, support documents that we can use in the classrooms, particularly [in October] and in September when we're all trying to establish this type of thing

[...]

So I can't say that I'm all that familiar with the policy, I know when I need to start investigating a situation, that's when I go to the policy and start pulling out verbiage to be able to share.

Cindy also explained that "...if something came up, I would have to look at the policy and find out how to deal with it". As these quotes illustrate, educators appeared to be quite willing to access the available resources and supports when the need for such arose, and yet such efforts are again reactionary as opposed to proactive and preventative. If educators are only seeking to better understand behaviours that would constitute GSB after experiencing this in the classroom or school, this means that they are relatively unprepared to deal with the behaviour in the moment, and potentially unprepared to recognize the behaviour as GSB in the first place.

Further illustrating the lack of intervention language and ability to intervene in a preventative sense, Sue's interview provided some more evidence of the idea that there may be teachers who are not necessarily comfortable discussing the issues of gender and sexual diversity, even in the classroom context. Based on their experiences with educators in different schools, Sue explained that:

I would like to see [discussions of gender and sexuality] more embraced in the junior grades, like more exposure to kind of that subject area where we can speak honestly and open about it and it's not taboo and the person presenting it isn't uncomfortable and afraid, um maybe more preparation for the staff in that age category to kind of feel more comfortable addressing it more openly so that kids feel validated and accepted and then it could kind of um, create more advocates in their peer groups...

As Sue explained, ensuring that such discussions are integrated into the junior (or early middle-school grades) would be beneficial in terms of conveying a sense of validation and acceptability. Given that so many of the student interviews reflected situations where labels of diversity (e.g. gay and lesbian) were heard most often in a solely negative peer

context, ensuring that educators are not only provided with intervention language that they can use and feel comfortable using, appears to be a way to ensure that such negative connotations can be challenged.

As much as educators stressed the need for students to be equipped with the language to understand and respond when instances of bullying arose, it also appears that educators may need further education as well. This is especially true when it comes to the language necessary to intervene in instances of GSB and for getting to the root of the issue when that involves challenging homophobic or heteronormative assumptions. Furthermore, there appears to be a need to integrate this education further into teacher and principal training and do so in a way that ensures educators become more knowledgeable and familiar with the language prior to situations when the need for this understanding arises.

Lastly, Sue and Glenn were two participants who frequently integrated notions of human rights into their discussions about their defense of diversity initiatives and discussions.

For example, Sue stated:

I get it and in some ways because I think as a parent I want to be in charge, right, like I know my authority and I should have a say over what happens in the school but I think when it comes to human rights there is still a lot of misunderstandings of little people having human rights and related to sexual orientation and expression and gender identity...

Glenn also discussed how they integrated this human right focus into classroom discussions:

The whole idea or the way I approach it is, you have to be tolerant of everyone, and it's Canadian law that everyone is tolerated and treated as equals. So, it's everyone's right to believe and do as they please as long as it doesn't infringe on someone else's rights which it wouldn't so, I mean, that's the kind of approach I take. So regardless of your religion, this is the law, and these are your basic rights as a citizen, that you know, you have the right to have any sort of relationship you wish, really.

These comments raise the possibility of using human rights discourses to deal with the tensions of ensuring that schools are safe and accepting environments for SGM students, while also maintaining the relationships with parents and communities that may be

opposed to the open engagement with such aspects of diversity. The issue of parental resistance is the final theme that will be discussed in this chapter.

### 7.5.3 We Have to Consider the Parents

Finally, it is important to address what emerged as one of the clearest themes, or obstacles for the educators in this sample. Being considerate of parents was often framed as the key obstacle to providing help when dealing with more specific instances of bullying, or when looking to provide help to students who may be struggling with their own identity.

In terms of the curriculum, several examples have already been provided to highlight the resistance to the curriculum that the educators had been faced with. Janice's interview provided one more example of how parents were often reluctant, and how such parental opposition was often dealt with by the two principals in the sample who often had to negotiate with parents who saw removing their children from this portion of the curriculum to be a better option: "So, the parents will come in and, not all, there's a few select parents who will come in and um, say, 'I don't want my child to learn health'."

Furthermore, although the teachers did not describe having to deal with such parental interactions, they both described how parents at their school often responded by keeping their children home from school while the Health and Physical Education curriculum was being taught. In other instances, they mentioned that parents had removed their children from the school.

**Glenn:** "I can't give you a number but there was a significant number that, you know, stayed home. I mean, I don't know if it was twenty-five percent but it was something like that..."

**Cindy:** "We've lost a lot of students in the school because of the curriculum...so that's the change for sure. We've lost probably two hundred kids in the last year and a half."

Additionally, educators felt that their ability to deal with a student's bullying behaviour is often seen as contingent on the behaviour and attitude of the parents of that child. Janice best describes this struggle:

[W]hen the parent is not willing to help their child accept responsibility, if they want to blame the school, if they want to condone the behaviour, then we're really at a loss to help change the behaviour. And there are parents that I've mentioned before, parents who bully the teachers, the principal, the other people in the community, and their kids see that and then when their same child, um, when that same child then is behaving like that at school the parent is equally reluctant to identify that.

From this, it is clear that parental influence needs to be taken into account in terms of both a prevention and identity-based perspective, and also in a more general sense when it comes to the issue of bullying.

In the preceding chapter, students had suggested the benefits of having someone (other than a teacher or principal) to talk to, such as a guidance counsellor. Such supports are often unavailable at the middle-school level (e.g. due to budget cuts or very high caseloads). Moreover, since parental consent is required, this may affect students who are struggling with identity issues but do not want their parents to know. Sue explains:

...if their parent is you know, kind of homophobic, then they're not getting that support at home and even we've like, I've had a personal experience. I was working with a student and the parents had a lot of homophobia, we explored it with the parents and it was really hard because they weren't interested in engaging in the process to kind of move them further, closer to acceptance and I was actually fired as the student's social worker because I didn't make him straight, or less effeminate...

None of the other educators discussed similar cases; nonetheless, Sue's comments show that some students need support from schools to build their resilience, especially in cases where parents are unwilling to provide it or when students do not feel comfortable looking to them for support.

When it comes to the conclusions that can be drawn from the educator data, it is evident that amongst the educators in this sample, bullying is taken seriously as an issue, but it is something that is understood in more general terms. Notions or understandings of GSB appear to be more limited, especially when it comes understanding how this issue may impact middle school aged students. While it may certainly be the case that GSB was not a significant issue in the schools where the participants worked, their reluctance to understand that it could be a potential issue (especially with regards to sexuality), is

troublesome in that it suggests that the educators may be even more unaware of the bullying that goes on than they believe themselves to be. Furthermore, while the participants expressed their duty to intervene, and to do so in a way that more fully addressed the root of the problematic behaviour, their ability get to the root of the issue with instances of GSB may be hampered by their lack of intervention language and the after-the-fact efforts to seek out available policies and supports.

Finally, the ongoing efforts of educators to support SGM students and deal with GSB also need to be understood in the context of existing tensions or more structural issues that are likely to inhibit the extent of intervention and support and the extent to which this is provided in a proactive manner that will help build resilience. For example, educator efforts are guided and restricted by the existing policies that set out particular definitions of bullying, and certain criteria that needs to be met in order for student behaviours to be classified as bullying. This, along with the reality that educators are not going to be aware of all the bullying that is ongoing, or is perceived to be occurring, indicates that despite the best intentions of educators, they may not always be able to intervene in the manner that students may desire. Furthermore, in their attempts to ensure that schools are safe and accepting spaces, educators often feel a need to ensure that the perspective of parents is accounted for and implement sufficient measures to support SGM individuals while ensuring that their efforts to do not alienate the parent community who may oppose, or be resistant to such measures. In addition, to the extent that supports and resources on issues of gender and sexual diversity are provided as additional resources, as opposed to mandatory and well-integrated components of teacher training, this leaves open the possibility that educators may not be fully prepared to not only identify issues, but also effectively and confidently deal with them when they arise.

## Chapter 8

### 8 Discussion

This research project has built on the existing literature by focusing specifically on experiences of GSB, an identity-based form of bullying that targets those who do not conform to cis-gendered and heteronormative expectations. As a specific sub-type, it is one that typically sees a greater frequency of victimization (Cénat et al., 2015; Robinson & Espelage, 2011; Swearer et al., 2008; Williams et al., 2003; 2005) and more elevated consequences (e.g. Russell et al., 2012) and is thus important to understand in order to advocate for better intervention mechanisms that can help to address the problem.

As this study has argued, when bullying is understood as largely a consequence of the status-based structure of schools (Collins, 2008; Milner, 2006), and insofar as GSB is fueled by a normative order that continues to privilege cis-gendered and heterosexual individuals over others (Butler, 1990; Peter & Taylor, 2013), anti-bullying initiatives that operate by encouraging behavioural change at the individual level will remain limited in their success. Given this understanding of bullying and the theoretical limitations of anti-bullying intervention strategies, adopting a resilience perspective is then seen as a fruitful initiative that can help guard students against the negative harms of GSB or mitigate the potential consequences.

Similar to anti-bullying efforts though, resilience should not be understood just at the individual level but should instead be situated in the broader social context to more completely understand how, in the case of resilience in the face of GSB, schools can play a role in asset and resource development. Furthermore, the use of a more critical lens also ensures that a resilience perspective can be used without falling victim to the reification of problematic risk discourses and negative evaluations that leave the status quo unquestioned (VanderPlaat, 2016).

Rooted in this understanding of the theoretical understanding of bullying, and in an approach that sees resilience as something that schools can help provide or develop, this project has attempted to address six main research questions. The initial three questions

focused on the research conducted with student participants and first attempted to gain a better understanding of what GSB entails or looks like from the perspective of those who have been targeted. The second question sought to understand how students dealt with bullying, and were thus able to be resilient, at least in an academic sense given the participant sample. The third question sought suggestions for school improvements that would better allow others to navigate the impacts of bullying. In focusing on those students who are academically resilient and had thus overcome the negative impacts of bullying at least in that one regard, this project was also an attempt to apply some of the key assumptions or underlying ideas of resilience and put them into practice.

Given the potential issues associated with the implementation of intervention initiatives, this project also aimed to ground the student suggestions for improvements in an understanding of the practical limitations or barriers that educators could identify. The perspectives of middle school educators were considered particularly important as research focusing on experiences at this age level is not as common as other research that focuses on the later high school years, and therefore this study was also an attempt to fill a gap in the existing literature.

Thus, the last three research questions sought to garner information from those educators who are tasked with preventing and intervening in instances of GSB. The fourth research question asked the educator sample about their understandings of GSB, and the fifth sought to understand how those educators dealt with GSB in their schools and classrooms. The final question looked at educators' responses to the suggestions for change that had been posed by students. The goal here was to determine whether such initiatives were already ongoing or might be a feasible change that could be successfully implemented.

This discussion chapter provides an overview of the main thematic findings and trends that emerged from the interview data, in relation to the six research questions identified above. This is summarized in the next section. In the two sections that follow this summary, the findings are also placed within the context of the theoretical and empirical literature to showcase the contribution this project makes to the existing body of



academic knowledge. Then, the main policy implications for schools and educators that emerged from the findings are put forward. The final section of the chapter contains an explanation of the key limitations of this project. This section in particular highlights that more needs to be done to build on our understanding of GSB and how schools can better support SGM student resilience. Nonetheless, highlighting the limitations of this study also illuminates some of the most promising avenues for future research projects.

## 8.1 Summary of Findings

### 8.1.1 Research Question 1: What Were the Student Experiences of GSB?

In answer to the first research question that asked what student experiences involved or looked like, the participants highlighted how their experiences were not reflective of extreme cases or particularly violent forms of bullying. Instead, and as demonstrated through the theme of ‘not the typical kind of bullying’, student participants made it clear that what they went through was not particularly violent or severe, but yet frequently used this juxtaposition as a measuring rod or comparative tool to explain their own situations. A comparison was also echoed by educator participants in the theme of ‘it doesn’t really happen here’ which describes how the bullying found at their institutions was not as severe as what might otherwise occur in schools responsible for older-aged children or as reported in media accounts. In both cases, such comparisons appear to rest on an implicit ideal form of bullying that is more violent and severe, despite the wide variety of behaviours that fall under the label of bullying in academic and policy definitions, and the lack of severity necessary to qualify behaviours as such. The prominence of the comparisons in the participant accounts suggests that stereotyped notions may play a role in shaping how individuals come to understand and categorize their own experiences.

Despite the apparent comparison to a typical notion of bullying, in coming forward with their accounts of (mostly) non-violent and non-severe forms, participants demonstrated that their understanding of bullying does often include the variety of behaviours and

actions encompassed in broader definitions. This diversity of experience was reflected in the themes of ‘sticks and stones, and words do hurt’ and ‘put down and left out’.

Some participants in the student group explained that they experienced relational forms of bullying, although verbal targeting appeared to be a more common experience amongst student participants. As explained earlier, while other research has focused on the use of homophobic epithets such as ‘fag’ and ‘dyke’ (Pascoe, 2007; Short, 2013), students described how more common terms such as ‘lesbian’ and ‘gay’ were the words that were used more frequently. Furthermore, these labels generally conveyed a negative meaning and were interpreted as insults, even prior to students fully comprehending what those terms meant.

One of the clearest themes to emerge from the student findings was the ‘omnipresent threat of becoming a target’ or the idea that students often felt threatened and indirectly targeted by the GSB and policing of heteronormativity that others experienced.

Bystanders in this case can be understood as potential secondary targets insofar as they also feel threatened by the bullying that they bear witness to. Although the focus is often on encouraging bystander intervention, the likelihood of this can be considered as compromised if individuals are fearful of being ‘outed’ through drawing attention to the situation and perhaps making themselves a target in the process. Not only does this suggest that the negative effects of GSB are more widespread than indicated in studies that focus on the direct effects on targets, it also indicates GSB can be more insidious than the overt forms that teachers may be more prone to look for. While this is not a typical approach to understanding the role of bystanders that is found in the literature, it is one that should be investigated.

Furthermore, when experienced as such, GSB can be understood as being rooted more in perception rather than direct targeting or actual occurrences. In this manner, the earlier debate over the necessity of repetition can be tied in, with findings from this study aligning more with Arora’s (1996) position that the threat of future instances of bullying matters more than the actual repetition of an act. Even when not directly targeted

themselves, the threat of being targeted or labelled constitutes a form of emotional distress that participants were impacted by.

### 8.1.2 Research Question 2: How Did Students Deal and Supports that Develop Resilience?

Focusing on a sample of students who had transitioned to post-secondary school was a way to narrow in on individuals who had displayed some form of resilience in the face of earlier bullying experiences. Indeed, the student participants in this sample should be considered resilient not only for their academic success, but also in overcoming the other negative effects associated with their bullying experiences and in some cases, the negative coping strategies that they employed when faced with being targeted. Thus, as made clear in this project, the dangers of bullying are varied and complex, even in the context of relatively less severe cases (at least in the eyes of participants).

The relatively less severe forms of bullying experienced by participants in this sample, as demonstrated in the theme ‘it could have been worse’, may in some ways explain the resilience of participants. On the one hand, the argument could be made that less resilience was needed by the participants in this sample, compared to what may have been needed by those other individuals who did have it worse. On the other hand, the perception of having experiences that were not as bad as some others may also be a source of resilience. As mentioned earlier, the role of relative comparisons in the development of resilience is something that future research should continue to explore. Caution should be given in this research to not reaffirming the potential influence of risk-based discourses, or the need to compare who is more or less at risk of certain negative outcomes.

Overall, although most participants tended to explain that they had overcome the negative effects and had moved on from the negative coping strategies employed in the past, others still struggled with some of the lingering effects of being targeted for their real or perceived identities. Thus, the contextual understanding of resilience (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005) is reinforced through this study which has highlighted various levels of success in different areas of personal well-being (e.g. academic versus mental health).

The shift towards mass attendance at post-secondary education may also be a factor that helps to explain the level of academic success that individuals experienced. Thus, while schools may already be able to foster resilience that can mitigate negative academic outcomes, more can be done to better outcomes in other areas such as mental health.

In looking more specifically at how the individuals dealt with their experiences of GSB and developed resilience, students often did so in isolation and in silence. Refusing to report their experiences was a common finding in the student interviews, explained through fears of drawing attention to oneself, fear of coming out through the reporting process, or a fear of reinforcing perceptions of ‘difference’. This suggested a certain level of invisibility for the targets of bullying, which can also mean that the effects of GSB are more widespread than might otherwise be assumed when harms are evaluated in the context of a two-party bully-victim framework.

For those who chose not to suffer in silence, the peer (Sapouna & Wolke, 2013) and family (Bowes et al., 2010) support found elsewhere in the literature was also reaffirmed here. In terms of more school-specific supports, which was the focus in this research, the results further indicated that educational avenues constituted both a coping strategy, and a key mechanism through which individuals could come to understand themselves and develop the self-confidence and self-acceptance to ‘own it’.

Developing this ability and agency also appeared to allow students to actively resist the normative expectations that were being policed through GSB and to challenge the remaining gendered and heteronormative assumptions to which they were also subjugated in the context of schools. Thus, while there were some examples of student ‘resistance as resilience’ that became apparent in the interviews, this was not something that all participants expressed a willingness to engage in, particularly when looking back on themselves in earlier educational contexts. Again, this finding reaffirms the importance of recognizing the ability of marginalized individuals to challenge and change the oppressive structures that they are subjected to, and the need to support those individuals in their efforts. On the other hand, it also serves as a reminder that the onus should not be placed solely on marginalized populations to do this work. Therefore, although the

ability to ‘own it’ and then engage in resistance would not be due entirely to the influence of schools, the legitimacy granted to non-heteronormative and non-cis-gendered identities through the institutional power of schools was given by students as an external mechanism of support and as something that could help in the development of personal assets.

### 8.1.3 Research Question 3: How Could Schools Change and Better Support Students?

In a very direct response to the question of how schools could have better helped students, issues around responses to GSB came first and foremost in the interviews. For example, students felt that educators needed to be better aware of the need to intervene in instances of bullying, or when homophobic or derogatory insults were being used in the school environment. Furthermore, their involvement needed to focus on not just the behaviours, but also on addressing the underlying beliefs and attitudes being conveyed through the use of such language. The themes ‘creating supportive environments’ and ‘educating educators’ are used to summarize these ideas.

In addition, students did appear to recognize the limitations of educator’s abilities to intervene in instances of GSB, given how it often remained hidden from educators through the discretion of bullies and also a lack of reporting by the targets themselves. ‘Missing the mark with current supports’ highlights this, and also reinforces the potential disjuncture that exists between the intentions that underlie anti-bullying and diversity initiatives, and their level of effectiveness at reaching their intended targets. Thus, while students did recognize that improvements could have been made to the way that educators handled situations, and the initiatives that were undertaken, there was an ultimate recognition in the limited level of success that would likely come about from those forms of support. The need for further efforts to foster resilience in light of these limitations is thus reinforced through this recognition.

In a less direct manner, when asked how schools and educators could have been more supportive, student participants sometimes drew on comparisons to their post-secondary experiences to make suggestions. For example, in their interviews, the students

frequently pointed out how they were experiencing a recognition of diversity in post-secondary schooling that had been missing in their previous educational histories. This recognition was granted through formalized class discussions, courses and in the participation of academic personnel in activist events outside of the classroom. From this inclusion, the student participants felt a level of acceptance and social support that had been missing in their earlier experiences and was a reflection of how schools had been ‘failing to educate’.

Although revisions to curriculum documents are making strides towards the wider inclusion of diversity in earlier class discussions, as demonstrated in Chapter 3, the extent to which this is pursued is still variable in implementation. Furthermore, as some students suggested, in their experience when such topics were pursued, this was often the result of student choice rather than educator direction. This finding was also reaffirmed through the educator results and their willingness to let students pursue those topics if they expressed an interest in them. Given how students have often expressed concerns regarding being ‘outed’ in the reporting of bullying behaviours or through association, such as by attending peer support groups for SGM individuals, it is understandable that students may similarly avoid taking advantage of this opportunity out of the same type of fear. In failing to include the topics involving gender and sexual diversity in official discourses and contexts, and making it a required element of student learning, the legitimacy of such knowledge can be challenged or overlooked by others who are not as likely to question the restrictive nature of socially constructed normative expectations.

Furthermore, aside from the inclusion of diversity, the students expressed that one of the best ways for schools to support students faced with GSB or in coming into their SGM identities would be to engage in a ‘normalizing of difference’ through educating about diversity. This ‘normalizing difference’ would include an inclusion of diversity but would be integrated in a way that would not, as suggested by Aldridge et al. (2018), reinforce difference. The tangible ways that schools could do this, according to students, included through curriculum content and through other representations in school, such as through the presence of non-heterosexual or gender non-conforming educators.

The clearest example of this level of inclusion was given by Emily, one of the student participants. Emily's self-acceptance in part was due to seeing a teacher who was unapologetically living a non-heterosexual life, but in a way that did not make a big deal out of their 'difference'. Thus, those who appeared most likely to be successful in such support were those who were SGM educators themselves, or were closely tied to SGM individuals, who through their experiences and connections could demonstrate and include stories of SGM individuals who were otherwise living a 'normal' life. This requires educators to have a level of comfort with topics of diversity, and an understanding of the necessity of providing such perspectives. Furthermore, as SGM educators are the most likely to perceive the need for this level of inclusion, this again raises the issue of placing the onus on minority populations to act as, or request, representation. From an academic perspective though, this finding ultimately reinforces the importance of focusing on resilience research so that stories of success can be collected and shared.

When students were able to understand their difference and see the normative expectations as being restricted to unnecessary binaries, they were better able to 'own it' and engage in their own forms of 'resistance as resilience'. When this happened, students were better able to shift away from viewing themselves as the issue, and instead come to recognize the standards to which they were being compared as restrictive and problematic.

Furthermore, this 'normalizing of difference' was purported by students to not only assist in fostering self-acceptance among SGM individuals, but as something that would demonstrate to those who engaged in bullying why such actions were harmful and unnecessary. For the student participants, GSB experiences eventually came to be viewed as a form of policing enacted by those who were similarly unaware of diversity and were just following along with what they had been taught. Bullies in such instances were therefore acting in ways that were perceived to be more immature and unintentionally harmful.

This finding also suggests that Ministry definitions of bullying that rely on language centering around intention or that idea that bullies “...ought to know that the behaviour would be likely to...” result in harm (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2018b, p. 5) are problematic if perpetrators are unaware of the harm their words and actions cause, and are also ill-informed by schools and educators about the likely implications of their actions. Unfortunately, this perspective was not one that the students appeared to have when they were in the thick of their bullying experiences, and so encouraging this understanding at younger ages when GSB is ongoing and the development of resilience is most timely, appears to be a key issue. This can help students see bullying in a broader social structural context, rather than as something that polices individuals for being different or ‘wrong’ themselves.

#### 8.1.4 Research Question 4: How Do Educators Understand GSB?

The best way to describe educator understandings of GSB, as evidenced in this study, is to focus on the ‘it’s bullying’ theme. This theme represents the idea that educators, especially teachers, were not always able to express what bullying that targets someone based on their real or perceived gender or sexual identity or performance would look like or entail. Nonetheless, the teachers ultimately reinforced that they had a solid understanding of bullying in a general sense and would ultimately recognize bullying for what it is and would treat it as such, regardless of the reasoning for those behaviours. Principals as well had the policy language to rely on in their classification of bullying and did tend to provide perspectives that were closer to this language than teachers.

In line with the student findings, the educators also appeared to create a differentiation between serious forms of bullying, and what they would be likely to find occurring not only at their schools but also in terms of the bullying that has been occurring in more recent years, given the increased attention paid to raising awareness and curtailing this negative behaviour. For example, after giving the example of the use of negative or homophobic language and labels, Janice noted that such terms were not necessarily being used in the same derogatory manner as much as they had been in previous years. Other educator interviews suggested that in middle school students would be too young to be



grappling with issues of SGM diversity, and so it would not be until later years that this issue would be likely to arise.

### 8.1.5 Research Question 5: How Do Educators Deal with GSB?

In terms of the fifth research question, the interesting findings of this study lie more in what was not said or acknowledged by participants, than what was. The majority of the educator respondents were not able to fully address this research question, as GSB was not something that they felt they had dealt with in their school contexts. ‘It doesn’t really happen here’ is the key theme that is used to demonstrate this finding, and the idea that the participants felt that the reason for the lack of GSB was due to the age of students and the size of their schools.

Thus, in a more hypothetical sense and based off of how they responded to other forms of bullying, the educators nonetheless felt as though they would certainly intervene if those situations arose as it was their ‘duty to respond’. Additionally, they would do so in a manner that would ‘get to the root of the issue’ and thus do more than merely admonish the negative behaviours that students were engaging in. This was something that student interviews suggested would be a beneficial way to intervene in instances of GSB.

The perception that educators held that suggested GSB would not be an issue in their schools is also somewhat oppositional to the potential that they highlighted through their recognition that despite their best intentions and efforts, they have not always been aware of ongoing instances of bullying, and may also miss other instances as well. The theme ‘we don’t always know’ illustrates how educators view bullying as something that students attempt to hide and as something that students are not always willing to disclose. In the face of research which suggests middle school is a time period when gender and sexual diversity and targeting does occur (Kosciw et al., 2018), this tendency to downplay the likelihood of this happening is problematic and suggests that educators may not be on the lookout for something that may actually be occurring. This idea was also reinforced in the student findings through those participants who expressed that the targeting of gender and sexuality differences, or at least the use of language used to

negatively frame such differences, did occur for them early on in their schooling, beginning for some in the elementary school grades.

In addition, while general forms of bullying can remain hidden from educators, concern should also be raised given the increased likelihood of the invisibility of GSB, relative to other forms of bullying. Since normative assumptions of heterosexuality continue to dominate, ‘passing’ can become a coping mechanism or hiding strategy for those who are, or fear being, targeted. This was a strategy employed by participants that also extended to attempting to ‘pass’ through their refusal to bring attention to the issue and report their experiences to educators. Thus, in the case of GSB, it is clear that efforts can be made by both bullies and targets to hide the behaviours from educators. A lack of awareness despite the potential for GSB, has implications not only for anti-bullying initiatives but also for the extent to which gender and sexuality are addressed and integrated as forms of diversity in classroom discussions at this middle school level.

#### 8.1.6 Research Question 6: How Do Educators Feel about the Student Suggestions?

In terms of intervening with GSB specifically, the educators and the students seemed to be on a similar page in terms of recognizing a need to ensure that educators are prepared to intervene and ‘get to the root of the problem’. In this way, it was recognized that educators must be prepared to address the underlying attitudes and biases that sustain GSB behaviours, but also need to have the language, knowledge, and skills to do so effectively. While the students felt that this was somewhat lacking from their perspective and based on their interactions with teachers, a similar feeling was reflected in the educator interviews as summarized in the ‘lacking intervention language’ theme. Thus, although the educators interviewed expressed their ‘duty to respond’ and a desire to ‘get to the root of the issue’, they did appear to lack some of the critical pedagogical tools necessary to get to the root of GSB and to do so in a way that could be conveyed with students in the middle school years.

In terms of the student suggestions that focused more on challenging the heteronormative and gendered nature of schooling, the educator responses were not as in line as with the

suggestion about intervention language but were still responsive and somewhat accepting of the given suggestions. Many of the student concerns were acknowledged by educators and were seen as steps that could foster a greater sense of diversity in terms of gender and sexuality. Furthermore, while this study has only looked at a small sample of educators, their desire to work to ensure the success and safety of their students is a finding that is easily understood as generalizable to the broader educator community. While some reluctance was expressed at the idea of engaging in preventative or proactive initiatives, educators deemed it important to address these issues, if the need arose. This idea can be seen in the ‘tentative agreement’ that educators expressed in relation to the student suggestions for school changes.

Thus, as long as educators are aware that diversity education needs to be a key element in ensuring the success and safety of students (as suggested by Leonardi & Saenz, 2014), efforts to increase the focus on such diversity are likely to follow. What educators must be aware of however, is the need for this even at the middle school level, and also the best ways to integrate the approaches into their teaching or school environments in an age-appropriate manner.

One of the key barriers or reasons for opposition that the educators identified, was the parental opposition that they felt would be likely if they were to more broadly integrate diversity-based initiatives into their middle school contexts to promote greater understandings of gender and sexual diversity. ‘We have to consider the parents’ thus represents the hesitancy that educators expressed and their perception that they needed to walk a fine line between advocating for student diversity and also not overstepping parents who follow different or competing moral codes.

## 8.2 Theoretical Implications

Two main areas can be considered more closely to assess how this project and the findings fit within the context of previous literature and theoretical material. The two areas include: 1) the status-based nature of bullying; and 2) the social-structural understanding of resilience. Both demonstrate how this project has made substantive contributions that both support existing theoretical perspectives, but also further currently

underdeveloped approaches to the topic of bullying. Ultimately what is suggested is that GSB and efforts to foster resilience need to be situated in a more structural and sociological understanding to not only understand the key issues, but also to determine the best steps for moving forward. Furthermore, based on the theoretical understandings that have been developed, and the qualitative themes that emerged from this project, challenging the heteronormative context appears to be a key mechanism that is essential for addressing both GSB and the structural development of resilience.

### 8.2.1 Status-Based Nature of Bullying

The understanding of bullying behaviour that was put forward in this dissertation was based on Milner's status-based conceptualization of schooling, whereby student power is rooted in status evaluations since their ability to access political and economic power is otherwise limited. Furthermore, different characteristics of schools can facilitate an increased focus on status-competition between students. In these contexts, bullying can then be understood as a behaviour that can be utilized in the renegotiation of one's status position relative to others.

Although this study did not set out to evaluate whether students understood bullying in this manner, as discussed in the student results chapter, there were a few examples from the student interviews where this status-based understanding of bullying came through. Thus, this study not only supports Milner's understanding of school hierarchies but advances and reaffirms the use of Milner's conceptual framework in the context of bullying literatures. For example, Patrick discussed the competition between students and the need to be part of something that occurs in high school but explained that once students transition to post-secondary environments there is more opportunity to be part of different groups. This lessened focus on bullying as a result of the diversified nature of status hierarchies in post-secondary contexts fits with Milner's (2006) assessment and suggestions for altering or eliminating the status reliance for students.

In his book, Milner (2006) explains a few possible ways that this could be done. While some of Milner's (2006) suggestions would involve more micro level changes (such as school uniforms to reduce the influence of competition or differentiation via dress),

overall Milner advocates for broader normative changes to education. For instance, he encourages attempts to “...*reduce the relevance of a particular kind of variation* in conformity and status by making other kinds of conformity a source of status” (Milner, 2006, p. 185). This appears to be the suggestion that most closely relates to the situation that Patrick describes. When post-secondary schooling offers more opportunities for positive status evaluations along various criteria, there is less of a restriction on status competition and thus less of a need to use bullying as a mechanism of differentiation. Encouraging changes to schools at the middle and high school levels to expand opportunities for positive status evaluations, such as what happens at the post-secondary level, would be a positive step but one that would understandably be harder for smaller schools or those with less resources to implement that are then less institutionally flexible.

In light of the potential limitations to the first potential change, Milner’s next status transformation suggestion is particularly relevant. Milner suggests that efforts to “*create norms emphasizing solidarity and equality* rather than inferiority and superiority” (Milner, 2006, p. 185, emphasis in original) can be effective. This would have particular promise for attempts to reduce GSB that are rooted in the status competitions in schools that rely on the hierarchical privileging of heterosexuality and cis-gendered performativities. As Samantha, another student participant discussed, “[b]y putting someone else down, like, it really does like reinforce your like, heterosexuality”. In this manner, GSB is a form of differentiating oneself against an inferior other, thus reinforcing one’s own superiority in terms of peer evaluations. This is tied to the broader cultural privileging of cis-gendered performativities and heteronormativity that is also being reproduced through schooling and education. Nonetheless, as long as schools can work to avoid conveying ideas that reinforce the status privileging of those who adhere to normative expectations, this shows promise for addressing and preventing GSB.

As Milner (2006) himself has claimed in reference to the use of homophobic terms to reference lower-status groups, “the theory would predict that if homophobic language becomes less acceptable in high schools, the negative labeling of lower-status groups would take other forms” (p. 253). Following this logic, if normative change occurs that

not only disrupts, but dismantles the privileging of certain gender performativities and heteronormativity, GSB could theoretically be significantly reduced, or at least reduced to a greater extent than if this privileging is left in place. When this occurs, there would be less perceived need amongst students to engage in bullying behaviours to police and punish deviant performativities and identities or assert their own identities as being non-deviant. Although this logic also suggests that as long as schools continue to encourage status differentiation amongst students, bullying would manifest for different reasons, at least this identity-based form of peer interaction would not occur to the same extent and effectively police and punish individuals for being who they are. Again, this is important to consider in light of the research that highlights the elevated consequences for targets of this form of bullying.

Although there are some signs from this study in particular that suggest that the change Milner suggested is occurring, it has only occurred to a certain degree. For example, the educators have experienced less use of homophobic slurs and students have seen a shift away from some of the cruder insults that have been used previously. Despite such trends, this does not mean that there has been a complete challenge and upset to the messages of superiority and inferiority or normativity and deviance that are embedded and transmitted through schools.

The silencing of non-heterosexual identities and gender diversity that the students raised is one example of how the messages of superiority and inferiority persist. Even when formal policies are in place that require educators to make schools safe and accepting environments, the educator data found here implies that there may be some contexts where educators foster or seek to enhance this inclusion only when there is a perceived student demand or need for this diversity. This hesitance towards inclusion may happen for various reasons, one of which was the potential for parental opposition, as highlighted by the educator sample in this study. This finding also reaffirms the literature that has previously found parental opposition to be an influence on educators (DePalma & Atkinson, 2009; Schneider & Dimito, 2008). Again, previous research has highlighted the issues associated with the limited inclusion of diversity which can ultimately

reinforce difference (Aldridge et al., 2018) and continue to leave the heteronormative structures unchallenged (Cumming-Potvin & Martino, 2014).

Therefore, it is crucial to understand that "...[interventions] will theoretically be required in perpetuity if they do not address the ... overarching structures and ideologies at the root of homophobic bullying" (Newman & Fantus, 2015, p. 48). This includes challenging and changing the heteronormative expectations and gendered assumptions that permeate educational institutions. In this manner, current efforts to address bullying, and in particular GSB, can thus be compared to treating the symptoms (Leonardi & Saenz, 2014), rather than the root of the issue. Furthermore, insofar as initiatives to address any form of bullying remain focused on the individual level and fail to account for the status-structures that perpetuate and help maintain bullying behaviours, anti-bullying efforts will remain capped in their potential to address the problem.

Given this limited potential for success, the notion of resilience was brought in to provide a direction for future efforts. Thus, although anti-bullying initiatives have their place and should not be completely abandoned, it is argued here that making a shift towards efforts to foster resilience is a more promising step towards dealing with the consequences of GSB. This is also likely to see more immediate effects given the progress that is already being made to integrate notions of equity, and the institutional policy frameworks that currently exist to sustain these inclusions even in the face of opposition.

### 8.2.2 The Social-Structural Understanding of Resilience

As Grace and Wells (2015) have suggested, resilience is a construct that is under development. As such, it is subject to different adoptions that stress variant understandings. For example, as a psychological construct, resilience can be understood at the micro level or the level of the individual. Alternatively, Grace and Wells (2015) have centered resilience in an ecological framework and focus on the broader social factors that can influence its development. This means that it is important to look beyond the individual when determining whether and how someone will be able to "...steel life in the face of adversity" (p. 3).

A similar perspective has been adopted here whereby resilience is seen as both a process and an outcome when individuals are faced with adversity, in this case bullying and GSB specifically. Furthermore, it is something that is understood as subject to the influence of broader structural factors, such as the influence of schools and educational institutions. In this case, schools and the education that students receive can act as an external support (Hinduja & Patchin, 2017) or resource (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005) that can foster student resilience, or can help individuals develop their internal supports (Hinduja & Patchin, 2017) or assets (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005) in a more indirect manner. As the research questions suggested, the focus here was on determining how schools could better support students and foster resilience in the face of GSB, a behaviour that is likely to continue in the absence of broader structural changes deemed necessary to more effectively address and prevent this behaviour.

The results from the current study strongly suggest that schools can best help support students through facilitating an environment where individuals can learn about their differences and come to understand this as a form of diversity, rather than a negative indicator of deviance. Therefore, in addition to providing numerous suggestions for how schools and educators could better address GSB, students also provided advice on how schools could challenge the gendered heteronormative environment that ultimately was a contributing source of GSB and a form of adversity on its own. Overall, the main suggestion was that schools needed to educate all students about gender and sexual diversity, but in a way that normalized difference. As the results suggest, this would not only help to foster resilience in the form of enabling students to ‘own it’, but would also work to simultaneously address and prevent GSB through expanding perpetrator understandings of differences and the harms of trying to police and enforce certain notions of normativity.

In normalizing difference, targets of GSB could then also reconceptualize the issue or the source of adversity that they were facing. As many students suggested, there was an ‘internalization of blame’ that occurred whereby in the absence of knowledge about gender and sexual diversity, and when faced with GSB, participants often saw themselves as the problem and questioned what was wrong with them personally, as opposed to



seeing bullying as something that was done by others and rooted in normative understandings and status competition. When the students were able to engage with information that suggested their differences were not problematic however, such as the during the discussions that occurred later in post-secondary education, students were then better able to reconceptualize the issue and see the behaviour of the bullies as problematic instead.

Unfortunately, this understanding of bullying was not one that the student participants seemed to acquire until later on in their educational trajectories. Engaging in efforts to ensure schools are able to provide students with not only the knowledge to understand their diversity, but also the acceptability of it, is thus given here as a way that targeted students can mitigate against the negative effects of bullying. As long as schools fail to educate students in this manner though, education can be seen as an impediment to the development of resilience in the face of GSB. Furthermore, it is also important to ensure that this perspective or knowledge comes at a time when it would be most useful to students, such as when they are faced with GSB, rather than later when they are looking back on their experiences but are still perhaps dealing with some of the negative outcomes associated with experiencing this form of bullying.

By interviewing students who had made successful transitions to post-secondary schooling, this study was an attempt to hear from those who could be referred to as academically resilient, in that they had achieved positive academic outcomes even in the face of GSB. As the research suggests, resilience is not an absolute concept or state. Thus, individuals can be resilient in certain regards, even though they might not be viewed or labelled as such in other ways (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005). This idea was reaffirmed given that the students in this study sometimes expressed engaging in negative coping strategies to deal with their bullying experiences. Although many felt that they had completely moved beyond the use of those coping mechanisms or habits, other participants expressed continuing struggles with mental health issues connected to their bullying experiences or made comments that suggested they were still dealing with internalized homophobia or negative evaluations about themselves as SGM individuals.

Thus, although the individuals could and were classified as resilient in one manner, but still struggled in other areas, they should still be considered resilient.

A resilience perspective, and one that allows for the label to be applied contextually, is also beneficial as it helps studies of bullying and research on SGM individuals move away from the traditional risk-based perspective that is often imposed (Grace & Wells, 2015; Russell, 2005). As this study demonstrated, despite facing GSB in their previous educational contexts, the students in this study were thriving in a post-secondary context. Such success stories are beneficial to see as they can also contribute to the ‘normalization of difference’ that the student participants wished they had seen earlier. In this manner, by focusing on the experiences of resilient students that are also succeeding in post-secondary contexts, this study has itself become one of those positive perspectives on SGM individuals that the students felt they would benefit from.

Even when such stories feature elements of challenge or setbacks in the resilience process (for example, the negative coping strategies employed by participants), this is still a beneficial perspective as it can showcase the realistic ways that resilient individuals have been able to navigate their identity formation in the face of structures and institutions that are otherwise alienating or marginalizing. Much like with reconceptualizing bullying as the problem rather than individualizing the blame, as suggested in the literature review featuring examples of SGM resilience can allow individuals to “...see themselves not as disaffected individuals but as members of marginalized groups, where personal difficulties are reconceptualized as collective struggles” (VanderPlaat, 2016, p. 198). Such struggles can then be acknowledged, but in a way that connects them with the external contributing factors rather than just personal weaknesses or risks.

When one adopts such a broad notion of resilience that not only accounts for social structural forces but also casts a critical eye on the discursive effects of the concept and its use, a sociological lens is being applied. This sociological approach to resilience is one that is not frequently adopted in the literature (VanderPlaat, 2016), and thus by doing so here, this study is another attempt to build on what has been done from this

perspective, and also demonstrate the applicability of these perspectives to the issue of GSB.

From this ‘Theoretical Implications’ section, it is clear that adopting a status-approach to bullying and a sociological approach to resilience requires researchers and educators to take into consideration the broader structural factors that are at the root of GSB and that can facilitate the resilience-building of SGM students and other targeted individuals faced with this form of bullying. Of those structural factors, the gendered and heteronormative nature of schooling is a key element that will need to be challenged in order to move towards addressing both GSB and building resilience. This subtle socialization of students contributes to understandings of hierarchical status arrangements that then shape status competitions between youth in school settings. These normative expectations also have the effect of alienating students from an understanding and acceptance of their diversity. Alternatively, when fostered by education this understanding and normalization of diversity appears to be a fundamental way that students can prepare to steel themselves in the face of adversity, and ultimately guard themselves against the negative effects of being targeted.

### 8.3 Policy Implications

In many cases, policy implications have been suggested throughout this project as they have been largely based off the critical consideration of existing anti-bullying and diversity strategies that are currently being employed in school contexts. In addition to those recommendations, two main policy implications can be stressed as they relate to the main findings of the current research and highlight key impediments that will need to be understood and taken into consideration when moving forward with efforts to challenge the gendered heteronormative nature of schooling that is at the root of GSB and resilience efforts. They include: 1) recognizing how the current optional ‘add-to-the-basics’ approach likely means that some schools are going to remain more heteronormative and thus unwelcoming to SGM students than others; and 2) ensuring that middle school is considered as a time period where efforts are needed to foster resilience.

While the intent here is not to downplay the work and successes of educators, it is important to continue to remain vigilant in efforts to assess and address the extent of bullying and GSB, the effectiveness of ongoing interventions, and the degree to which overall notions of progress extend to all school contexts. This is particularly important when it comes to efforts to address heteronormativity.

Rayside (2014) has suggested that an impediment to further improvements in addressing sexual diversity in Canada lies in the complacency of the Canadian public in terms of pushing for additional change. This complacency is rooted in the legal victories that have already been earned, assumptions that the heteronormative cultures of schools have kept pace with these broader patterns of acceptance, and a comparison of the Canadian context to that of the American in terms of the relative lack of religious and political opposition to such diversity (Rayside, 2014). Educators should also be aware of the potential for such complacency in the context of bullying and GSB. For example, just because the situation is better than it was, or is better in certain areas than others, this does not mean that all school climates and cultures are safe and accepting and are equally staffed with educators prepared to prevent or respond to GSB.

### 8.3.1 Problematicizing the Optional ‘Add-to-the-Basics’ Approach

As Chapter 3 has suggested, the information for how to integrate a critical pedagogical approach that better educates students about diversity and challenges the dominant power structures maintained through educational institutions is available, albeit perhaps unevenly distributed across schools, boards and regions. The central issue here is that it is seemingly available in an optional ‘add-to-the-basics’ manner. In this case the onus is placed on educators to go beyond what is explicitly required in the curriculum, or in professional development training, in order to educate themselves on the issues. Additionally, they are also then responsible for preparing themselves to not only recognize the manifestations of GSB and other diversity related issues, but also to intervene. Given the everyday demands placed on educators, it is understandable to see how such education may not occur, especially when educators do not recognize the need for it at earlier age levels and when a heterosexual cis-gendered student body is presumed due to normative assumptions. As some of the educators in this sample suggested,

teachers and principals may have a general awareness of the supports that are available and where to find them, but unless pushed to search them out, educators may be unaware of the content of those supports and ill-prepared to intervene in the best or most effective ways.

Even when educators are themselves prepared to ‘add-to-the-basics’ and push beyond the minimum level of diversity integration that is expected of them, a lack of institutional support (DePalma & Atkinson, 2009; Rayside, 2014; Short, 2013; 2017) and the potential for parental opposition remain influential factors that may continue to inhibit the extent of integration that is reached. Certainly, the educator perceptions expressed in the ‘we have to consider the parents’ theme reflect the idea that educators remain cognizant of and anticipate the potential for parental opposition. This barrier has been found elsewhere in the literature (DePalma & Atkinson, 2009; Schneider & Dimito, 2008) and, from the basis of this study at least, appears to be the main reason why educators would fail to ‘add-to-the-basics’ and push the boundaries of what would otherwise pass as the minimum level of acceptance of diversity. Educators in this regard are left balancing competing moral codes whereby respect for parental authority is juxtaposed against the need to ensure students are accepted and gender and sexual diversity is reflected in schools.

When faced with parental opposition, and when judged on the basis of their own perceptions of safety and inclusion, the basics expected by the Ontario Ministry of Education and as mandated in policies may be viewed as sufficient, even if they ultimately fall short of challenging the ideological biases that uphold GSB and heteronormative and cis-gendered privileging. Other initiatives such as school GSAs can be critiqued in a similar regard. As mentioned in the review of ongoing initiatives (see Chapter 3), the phrasing of current GSA legislation generally means that the establishment and maintenance of GSAs rely on student advocacy or student-driven demand. While it is certainly beneficial that the legislation at least makes these student groups possible upon request, their existence is still largely reliant on there being a request or a perceived need. This is complicated further by the potential desire of students to remain hidden.

As has been discussed earlier and demonstrated in the student findings of this study, students may not be willing to put themselves in the position to make such a request, or to even attend, despite otherwise being able to benefit from the formation and participation in such groups. As suggested, students who engage in ‘passing’ as a defence mechanism would be less likely to call for the implementation of GSAs in schools. Furthermore, those not subjected to direct targeting may still understand their potential for becoming targets and would thus be extremely focused on their ability to ‘pass’ and avoid subsequent detection. In this case, ‘passing’ would require students to avoid such associations that might otherwise be a form of support, given the frequent ‘gay by association’ assumptions that were at least perceived by the student participants in this study.

Thus, when there is a hesitancy amongst educators to fully embrace diversity initiatives, perhaps in anticipation of parental opposition, or for whatever other reason, the question exists as to whether or not schools are doing enough to challenge the gendered and heteronormative messaging that is otherwise transmitted through schools. If not, and in their maintenance of such normative expectations, schools can be viewed as unwelcoming, unsafe, and perhaps even hostile environments for SGM individuals. Furthermore, when GSB is something that both bullies and targets will actively try to hide from educators, and when ‘passing’ is used as a defence mechanism or a way to avoid being targeted, the likelihood that educators perceive the need to extend or enhance their focus on gender and sexual diversity is also lessened.

Yet, for those educators who wish to push back against parental opposition to ensure that diversity is reflected in classroom discussions, legislative support exists. Human rights discourses provide a valuable tool for educators who wish to go beyond the basics and ensure that classroom content reflects the diversity of identities that exist, not just within their classrooms, but within broader Canadian society. Educators must be prepared to challenge parental authority when it may impact the extent to which inclusion is promoted in the classrooms and must also have a handle on the language necessary to successfully explain to parents the need to balance respect for all human rights.

### 8.3.2 Encouraging a Focus on Middle School Contexts

As this research project also suggests, the timing of GSB interventions and efforts to develop resilience needs to coincide with when GSB is actually occurring and should also take into consideration how early on in schooling normative messages and expectations regarding gender and sexuality are being conveyed to students. For example, in as early as elementary school student participants expressed hearing words such as ‘gay’ and ‘lesbian’ used in a negative manner. Along with the simultaneous absence of positive uses of the term suggested through the student interviews, and as implied by the educators in their resistance to discuss such topics with students of a younger middle-school age, this negative usage further reinforces the possibility that early formed negative perceptions will hold sway over how individuals perceive such forms of diversity. This can impact their willingness to identify such labels as positive markers of identity and also their self-perception when they come to understand those labels as potentially being relevant to themselves.

Certainly, educational efforts that are made in later grades to foster notions of diversity and connect the terms to positive meanings are a step in the right direction. Nonetheless, what this study suggests is that the timing of such messages is crucial and positive messages need to align with when the use of such terms as insults occurs, if not prior to. Furthermore, and as the previous section highlights, when such discussions are not mandated and educators are left to determine whether or not this needs to be brought up, the potential remains for some school contexts to have less of a focus on such topics. As demonstrated in the section on the Health and Physical Education curriculum, suggestions for the inclusion of gender and sexual diversity do occur in the elementary and middle school grades, but there is a discrepancy between when this is featured as a suggested topic, and when it is given as a required element. Thus, it can be expected that there would be variability in the extent to which some middle school contexts feature these discussions over others when only suggested to do by the curriculum guidelines.

Understandably discussions need to happen in an age-appropriate manner. Given the findings from both students and educators, more direction could be provided to educators in this regard and in terms of the language necessary to deal with parental opposition.

Cindy's interview provided the clearest example of this. Despite their willingness to intervene and to get to the root of the issue in instances of bullying, Cindy expressed a lack of awareness of how to address gender and sexual diversity with students in their grade six class. Rooted in their own personal perspective, Cindy also suggested that GSB was not something they would need to be concerned about and their students would be too young to identify as SGM. Yet, from what was shown in the student findings, this is not always the case. Although identifying as 'gay' was not a common occurrence for students in elementary or middle school, identifying as 'different' was. Sometimes that identification or a SGM label was prescribed by other individuals and targeting occurred before a clear self-understanding was formed. Ignoring these occurrences or assuming that they would not happen at that age is not the answer. Instead, middle schools should be conceptualized as a potential site for this struggle and educators should be made aware of how they can help individuals come to terms with the acknowledgement and acceptance of such forms of diversity, regardless of whether or not they are applicable to the students in the classroom.

## 8.4 Limitations and Implications for Future Research

Overall, this project has made strides towards narrowing in on and investigating a particular sub-form of bullying and have pointed out some valuable suggestions for determining how to move forward with initiatives that can bolster the resilience of those targeted by GSB. It is prudent however, to consider the limitations of this study especially as they can be used to suggest future directions for research. Four main limitations have been identified to illustrate such considerations.

First is the potential limitation of using retrospective student data. Although hindsight is beneficial as it allows students to reflect on and articulate their experiences from a perspective that is removed from situations of GSB, it would still be beneficial to continue this line of inquiry with students who are currently embedded in middle and high school contexts. This research can seek to determine if their experiences and ideas for support align with what has been found here. Doing so would also allow for research to account for social change around an increased acceptance of gender and sexual diversity. Although social change is a gradual process, important events such as the



revision of the Health and Physical Education curriculum has likely sparked increased debate and discussion amongst parents and even students which may significantly impact the ways in which such issues are viewed.

Along with considering the younger perspectives, it would be beneficial to extend the sample to include other students who may have been less academically resilient or have simply chosen alternative pathways other than post-secondary attendance. The emphasis on schooling as a key tool for fostering self-acceptance and understanding could be due to how closely the student participants are tied to their formal education. Comparing how others who are not as embedded in schooling have experienced GSB, and the solutions or supports that they see as beneficial, would ensure that the ideas expressed in this study are not just due to a selection effect.

Alternatively, as VanderPlatt (2016) has suggested, resistance to the status quo can also be conceptualized as resilience. In this manner, individuals who faced similar experiences but did not transition to post-secondary schooling could have been exerting their agency by refusing to continue on an educational path when educational institutions themselves have traditionally been less than supportive in their recognition of SGM identities. In this manner, disengagement with education is less a sign of a negative outcome resulting from bullying, and one that is more indicative of an individual's 'resistant resilience' and their refusal to engage in alienating institutions and educational processes.

Extending the sample of educators would likely also highlight some other potential barriers to successful interventions and obstacles that would need to be considered when implementing change. The participants in this study were drawn from the Toronto District School Board and thus come from a resource-rich environment that is known for taking steps to encourage diversity. Thus, a third limitation is that this study has not captured the perspectives of educators in other areas who may face additional or different challenges when it comes to accomplishing the same goals. A more well-rounded understanding would be necessary to ensure changes can adequately account for other potential issues, so future studies should seek to investigate the educator experiences in

other school regions. As this study has identified challenges within a context where student populations are diverse and resources and educator supports are abundant, this supports the reality that barriers do exist and often educators are left balancing competing interests and being asked to do so without a clear picture of what the ideal supportive learning environments would entail. Further research should also seek to explore and compare the experiences of public-school educators with the experiences of those who work in religious-based school institutions as well. Given the differential understanding and implementation of provincial policies suggested here, it brings up the question of whether research would find similar or further variation in religious-based school contexts.

A final limitation of this research study surrounds the issue of identity and in particular, the non-identification of some participants and how this creates limitations for internal comparisons between the sample group and recommendations for targeted interventions, depending on how students identify. For example, this study uncovered an internalization of blame and homophobic thoughts amongst some participants that could have been explored further if more information about how each of the participants identified had been gathered. This could have allowed for a greater questioning of how internalization may have differed between students who were struggling with understanding their sexuality or orientation, versus those targeted for a presumed identity. Furthermore, as participants explained in the interviews, not conforming to gender expectations in terms of who they associated with at recess was thought of as a marker that contributed to their GSB targeting. This experience of transgressing gender norms is certainly important to understand, but the effects of GSB would likely differ for those who were targeted based on their voluntary associations and yet identified as cis-gendered, compared to those who were targeted for such associations and were also navigating feelings of not belonging in their sexed and gendered bodies. Understanding those differential effects would enable research to contribute to suggestions for more informed school-based interventions as well. Furthermore, asking educators how they identify would also provide additional context for understanding their perspectives or frame of reference, or may, as Wells (2017; 2018) has found, illuminate further challenges for intervening if they themselves are SGM individuals.

As explained earlier, the intention behind not asking participants to identify was based mostly around respecting participants and their right to choose who they would like to disclose their identities to. As illustrated, many participants did feel comfortable disclosing their identity during the course of the interview, although this mainly centered around disclosing one's sexual orientation as opposed to gender-identity. Thus, future research should consider strategies that still allow for this respect around disclosure (which could be done by stressing the participant's right to refuse to answer any research questions), but also be designed around the recognition that identity can be a valuable factor in data analysis that provides a greater potential for investigating participant histories and experiences with self-identification in relation to gender and sexuality.

Integrating more of a discussion around identity into interview questions and allowing greater agency in self-declarations around gender-identity could also work to itself be a mechanism for engaging in critical efforts to challenge the normative order. As suggested by Wells (2017; 2018), and particularly in the case of trans-identified participants, identity can represent a hard-won right. As stated earlier, while the intent behind using gender-neutral pronouns and subject referents was done in an effort to not assume gender identity, an alternative approach would be to provide greater opportunity for participants to make their own declarations and to use those throughout the reporting of research findings. Therefore, allowing participants to consent to the use of their real names in research, or to provide an opportunity for them to select their own pseudonym and pronouns can also be a valuable way to respect participant "...identities and positionalities as sexual minority persons" (Wells, 2017, p. 271). Furthermore, questions about how participants identify and declarations around preferred pronoun use that result in individuals 'coming out' as cis-gendered or heterosexual could also be viewed as "...a method to question and interrogate heterosexual privilege and heteronormative [cultures]" (Wells, 2017, p. 272).

## 8.5 Concluding Remarks

The findings of this study have demonstrated that encouraging representations of diversity in a way that is normalized and not 'exceptionalized' is thus a promising avenue for dealing with the effects of GSB in schools, but is an initiative that may also bolster

efforts to reduce the extent of GSB in the first place. Unfortunately, current curriculum initiatives and policies regarding school climates mandate a ‘basic’ level of inclusion that means that discussions of diversity may not go as far as normalizing and may instead reinforce differences. Instead, the onus tends to be placed on students to request and initiate inclusivity initiatives such as GSAs, and on educators to determine the focus and extent to which diversity measures are pursued. Such efforts may additionally be hindered by the educator’s own perceptions regarding age-appropriateness and the likelihood of encountering issues such as GSB, and on their need to balance competing moral codes when parents exert, or are at least perceived to exert, opposition and resistance to school-based efforts of inclusivity.

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## Appendices

**Figure 1: Appendix A - Ethics Approval Notice, The University of Western Ontario**



**Western  
Research**

Research Ethics

Western University Health Science Research Ethics Board  
NMREB Delegated Initial Approval Notice

Principal Investigator: Dr. Wolfgang Lehmann  
Department & Institution: Social Science/Sociology, Western University

NMREB File Number: 106292

Study Title: Gender and Sexuality-Based Bullying: Student Educational Resiliency and Teacher and Administrator Intervention Experiences  
Sponsor:

NMREB Initial Approval Date: March 9, 2015

NMREB Expiry Date: March 09, 2016

**Documents Approved and/or Received for Information:**

Document Name	Comments	Version Date
Instruments	Document 10 - Interview Guides	2015/01/22
Recruitment Items	Document 4 - Public Announcement	2015/01/22
Recruitment Items	Document 5 - Business Cards	2015/01/22
Recruitment Items	Document 2 - Newsletter Posting	2015/01/22
Recruitment Items	Document 1 - E-mail to Student Groups	2015/01/22
Recruitment Items	Document 6 - Key Informant E-mail	2015/01/21
Revised Letter of Information & Consent	Document 9 - Revised Letter of Information and Consent for Teachers (PDF)	2015/02/24
Revised Letter of Information & Consent	Document 8 - Revised Letter of Information and Consent for Students (PDF)	2015/02/24
Recruitment Items	Document 7 - Revised Flyer for Teachers (PDF)	2015/02/24
Recruitment Items	Document 3 - Revised Flyer for Students (PDF)	2015/02/24
Revised Western University Protocol	Document 13 - Ethics Application Revised PDF	2015/02/26

The Western University Non-Medical Research Ethics Board (NMREB) has reviewed and approved the above named study, as of the NMREB Initial Approval Date noted above.

NMREB approval for this study remains valid until the NMREB Expiry Date noted above, conditional to timely submission and acceptance of NMREB Continuing Ethics Review.

The Western University NMREB operates in compliance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2), the Ontario Personal Health Information Protection Act (PHIPA, 2004), and the applicable laws and regulations of Ontario.

Members of the NMREB who are named as Investigators in research studies do not participate in discussions related to, nor vote on such studies when they are presented to the REB.

The NMREB is registered with the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services under the IRB registration number IRB 00000941.

[Redacted Signature] member

Ethics Officer to Contact for Further Information

Erika Basile	Grace Kelly	Mina Mekhail	Vikki Tran
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*This is an official document. Please retain the original in your files.*

**Figure 2: Appendix B - Ethics Amendment Approval, The University of Western Ontario**

Research Ethics

**Western University Non-Medical Research Ethics Board  
NMREB Amendment Approval Notice**

**Principal Investigator:** Dr. Wolfgang Lehmann  
**Department & Institution:** Social Science/Sociology, Western University

**NMREB File Number:** 106292

**Study Title:** Gender and Sexuality-Based Bullying: Student Educational Resiliency and Teacher and Administrator Intervention Experiences

**Sponsor:**

**NMREB Revision Approval Date:** November 10, 2015

**NMREB Expiry Date:** March 09, 2016

**Documents Approved and/or Received for Information:**

Document Name	Comments	Version Date
Revised Western University Protocol		2015/10/16
Other	E-mail Offering Compensation	2015/10/14
Revised Letter of Information & Consent	Student	2015/10/15
Recruitment Items	Flyers for Student Recruitment	2015/10/15

The Western University Non-Medical Science Research Ethics Board (NMREB) has reviewed and approved the amendment to the above named study, as of the NMREB Amendment Approval Date noted above.

NMREB approval for this study remains valid until the NMREB Expiry Date noted above, conditional to timely submission and acceptance of NMREB Continuing Ethics Review.

The Western University NMREB operates in compliance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2), the Ontario Personal Health Information Protection Act (PHIPA, 2004), and the applicable laws and regulations of Ontario.

Members of the NMREB who are named as Investigators in research studies do not participate in discussions related to, nor vote on such studies when they are presented to the REB.

The NMREB is registered with the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services under the IRB registration number IRB 00000941.

Ethics Officer to Contact for Further Information: Erika Basile ☐ Nicole Kaniki ☐ Grace Kelly ☐ ☒ Mina Mekhail ☐ Vikki Tran ☐

*This is an official document. Please retain the original in your files*

**Figure 3: Appendix C - Recruitment Flyer for Students**



## Sociology

## Gender and Sexuality-Based Bullying

**Be a part of a study on student experiences of gender and sexuality-based bullying.**

*Have you been bullied based on your real or perceived gender/sexual identity?*

*Are you in at least the second year of a post-secondary program?*

*Did you attend an Ontario middle and high school?*

Are you between the age of 18 and 25?

*Are you open with your peers and family about your gender/sexual identity?*

If you answered YES to these questions you may be eligible to participate in a study investigating student experiences with gender/sexuality-based bullying.

The purpose of this research study is to investigate gendered or sexuality-specific bullying. This study specifically focuses on students who have entered into post-secondary education who have previously experienced bullying based on their real or perceived gender/sexual identities. I will ask you about how your experiences with bullying or harassment affected your educational experience, your thoughts on what helped you get through those experiences, and your ideas about improvements that could be made in schools to assist future students who are faced with a similar situation. If you agree to participate, you can take part either in an individual interview or in a group interview.

You will receive \$10.00 compensation for participating in this study.

If you are interested, please call me (Elizabeth Torrens) at [REDACTED] and/or e-mail at [REDACTED] for more information.

Elizabeth Torrens, PhD Candidate, Department of Sociology,  
Western University, London, ON N6A 5C2

Version Date – 10/15/2015

[illegible]

## Figure 4: Appendix D - Letter of Information and Consent for Students



Sociology

**Project Title: Gender and Sexuality-Based Bullying: Student Educational Resiliency and Teacher and Administrator Intervention Experiences**

**Principal Investigator:**

*Dr. Wolfgang Lehmann, PhD, Department of Sociology, The University of Western Ontario*

### **Letter of Information**

#### **1. Invitation to Participate**

You are being invited to participate in this research study which seeks to explore the experiences of students who have previously dealt with bullying based on their real or perceived gender/sexual identities. Thank you for expressing your interest in participating in an interview and sharing your experience with the researcher.

#### **2. Purpose of the Letter**

The purpose of this letter is to provide you with information required for you to make an informed decision regarding participating in this research.

#### **3. Purpose of this Study**

The purpose of this study is to gather information from students who have previously been bullied based on their real or perceived gender/sexual identities, but have made the transition to post-secondary education. This research seeks to investigate what impact such bullying had on your educational experience and what may have helped you overcome or mitigate such experiences, and what are some of the suggestions you have for implementing changes within the classroom environment to assist current and future children who may be faced with such bullying.

#### **4. Inclusion Criteria**

You are eligible to participate in this study if you: 1) have been bullied based on your real or perceived gender/sexual identity, 2) are in at least the second year of a post-secondary program, 3) attended an Ontario middle school and high school, 4) are between the ages of 18 to 25, and 5) are open with their peers and family about your gender/sexual identity.

#### **5. Exclusion Criteria**

Individuals who do not fit the aforementioned criteria are not eligible to participate in the study.

## **6. Study Procedures**

If these criteria apply to you, I am interested in talking to you about your experiences with gender and sexuality-specific forms of bullying. You will be asked to participate in either a group interview with a small number of other students, or an individual one-on-one interview. You will be able to choose which interview format you would prefer. It is anticipated that the interview will take approximately 60-90 minutes to complete. The interview will be conducted at a location that is convenient for you, or if participating in a group interview, the location will be a room within the Sociology department at Western University. The interview will be audio-recorded and audio files will be used to create a transcript of the interview. If you do not consent to being recorded, you will not be included in the research study. There will be a total of 40 students participating in this research study.

## **7. Possible Risks and Harms**

There are no known or anticipated risks or discomforts associated with participating in this study.

## **8. Possible Benefits**

Although you may not directly benefit from participating in this study, your participation may help in the development of new knowledge that may assist current and future students who may experience a similar situation. This may include revisions of current educational policies and programs, or the development of new programs that will serve to benefit students.

## **9. Compensation**

You will be compensated \$10.00 for your participation in this research. You will still receive compensation if you decide to withdraw from this study and not complete the interview.

## **10. Voluntary Participation**

Participation in this study is voluntary. You may refuse to participate, refuse to answer any questions, or withdraw from the study at any time.

## **11. Confidentiality**

I can also assure you that all your answers will be kept strictly confidential. No one outside the research team will have access to the data gathered during this study. All information will be either stored in a password protected computer or kept locked/secured in my office at Western University. Your confidentiality will be respected. I will be using pseudonyms for personal or school names in the transcript of the interview, as well as in all reports and other publications generated from the data. Furthermore, the audio tapes will be destroyed upon the completion of the project, and the transcripts will be destroyed after five years.

Participant Initials\_\_\_\_  
Version 10/15/2015

## 12. Contacts for Further Information

If you require any further information regarding this research project or your participation in the study you may contact me at [REDACTED] or via e-mail at [REDACTED] or my supervisor, Dr. Wolfgang Lehmann, at [REDACTED] or via email at [REDACTED]. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant or the conduct of this study, you may contact The Office of Research Ethics (519) 661-3036, or via e-mail at [ethics@uwo.ca](mailto:ethics@uwo.ca).

## 13. Publication

If the results of the study are published, your name will not be used. If you would like to receive a copy of any potential study results, please provide your name and contact number on a piece of paper separate from the Consent Form.

*This letter is yours to keep for future reference.*

Thank you for your cooperation and consideration.

Elizabeth Torrens  
Ph.D. Candidate  
Department of Sociology  
Western University  
London, ON N6A 5C2

Participant Initials\_\_\_\_  
Version 10/15/2015



**Project Title: Gender and Sexuality-Based Bullying: Student Educational Resiliency and Teacher and Administrator Intervention Experiences**

**INTERVIEW CONSENT FORM**

Principal Investigator: Wolfgang Lehmann  
Associate Professor  
Department of Sociology  
Western University  
London, ON N6A 5C2

Co-investigator: Elizabeth Torrens  
Ph.D. Candidate  
Department of Sociology  
Western University  
London, ON N6A 5C2

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Interviewee Name (please print)

I have read the Letter of Information, have had the nature of the study explained to me and I agree to participate. All questions have been answered to my satisfaction.

I understand that this interview will be audio-recorded, but I have the right to stop the interview at any time and end my participation in this study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Interviewee Signature

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Person Obtaining Informed Consent (please print)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Person Obtaining Informed Content

Participant Initials\_\_\_\_\_  
Version 10/15/2015

## Figure 5: Appendix E – Recruitment Flyer for Educators

**Study Title: Gender and Sexuality-Based Bullying: Student Educational Resiliency and Teacher and Administrator Intervention Experiences**

**Flyer for Teachers**

---

### Gender and Sexuality-Based Bullying

**Be a part of a study on student experiences of  
gender and sexuality-based bullying.**

*Are you currently employed as a teacher or principal in an Ontario public school?  
Do you teach or supervise students between grades 4-8?  
Have you had experience in dealing with gender or sexuality based bullying in the school environment?*

If you answered YES to these questions you may be eligible to participate in a study investigating teacher experiences with gender/sexuality-based bullying.

The purpose of this study is to gather information from teachers who have had to deal with gender/sexuality based bullying (based on either real or perceived gender/sexual identities). This research seeks to investigate your understanding of this form of bullying, what your common responses are, and what suggestions you have for improving the ways that such bullying is dealt with in the school environment.

If you agree to participate, you can take part in an individual interview that will last approximately 60-90 minutes and can take place at a location that is convenient to you.

Although you may not directly benefit from participating in this study, your participation may help in the development of new knowledge that may assist current and future students who may experience this form of bullying. This may include revisions of current educational policies and programs, or the development of new programs that will serve to benefit students.

You will not be compensated for your participation in this research.

If you are interested in participating, or receiving more information about this study, please call me (Elizabeth Torrens) at [REDACTED] and/or e-mail at [REDACTED]

Elizabeth Torrens, PhD Candidate,  
Department of Sociology, Western University,  
London, ON N6A 5C2

**Figure 6: Appendix F - Letter of Information and Consent for Educators**



Sociology

**Project Title: Gender and Sexuality-Based Bullying: Student Educational Resiliency and Teacher and Administrator Intervention Experiences**

**Principal Investigator:**

*Dr. Wolfgang Lehmann, PhD, Department of Sociology, The University of Western Ontario*

**Letter of Information**

**1. Invitation to Participate**

You are being invited to participate in a research study investigating the experiences of teachers or principals who deal with gender or sexuality-based bullying in the school environment. Thank you for expressing your interest in participating in an interview and sharing your experience with the researcher.

**2. Purpose of the Letter**

The purpose of this letter is to provide you with information required for you to make an informed decision regarding participating in this research.

**3. Purpose of this Study**

The purpose of this study is to gather information from teachers who have had to deal with gender/sexuality based bullying (based on either real or perceived gender/sexual identities). This research seeks to investigate your understanding of this form of bullying, what your common responses are, and what suggestions you have for improving the ways that such bullying is dealt with in the school environment.

**4. Inclusion Criteria**

You are eligible to participate in this study if you: 1) are currently employed as a teacher or principal in an Ontario public school, 2) teach or supervise students between grades four and eight, and 3) have had experience dealing with gender or sexuality based bullying in the school environment.

**5. Exclusion Criteria**

Individuals who do not fit the aforementioned criteria are not eligible to participate in the study.

**6. Study Procedures**

If these criteria apply to you, I am interested in talking to you about your experiences with gender and sexuality-specific forms of bullying. You will be asked to participate in an individual one-on-one interview. It is anticipated that the interview will take approximately 60-90 minutes to

Western University, Faculty of Social Science/ Sociology, Social Science Centre, 5306  
1151 Richmond Street, London, ON, Canada N6A 3K7 t. 519-661-3606 [www.westernu.ca](http://www.westernu.ca)

Participant Initials\_\_\_\_  
Version 02/24/2015

complete. The interview will be conducted at a location that is convenient for you. The interview will be audio-recorded and audio files will be used to create a transcript of the interview. If you do not consent to being recorded, you will not be included in the research study. There will be a total of 40 teachers/principals participating in this research study.

#### **7. Possible Risks and Harms**

There are no known or anticipated risks or discomforts associated with participating in this study.

#### **8. Possible Benefits**

Although you may not directly benefit from participating in this study, your participation may help in the development of new knowledge that may assist current and future students who may experience this form of bullying. This may include revisions of current educational policies and programs, or the development of new programs that will serve to benefit students.

#### **9. Compensation**

You will not be compensated for your participation in this research.

#### **10. Voluntary Participation**

Participation in this study is voluntary. You may refuse to participate, refuse to answer any questions, or withdraw from the study at any time.

#### **11. Confidentiality**

I can also assure you that all your answers will be kept strictly confidential. No one outside the research team will have access to the data gathered during this study. All information will be either stored in a password protected computer or kept locked/secured in my office at Western University. Your confidentiality will be respected. I will be using pseudonyms for personal and school names in the transcript of the interview, as well as in all reports and other publications generated from the data. Furthermore, the audio tapes will be destroyed upon the completion of the project, and the transcripts will be destroyed after five years.

#### **12. Contacts for Further Information**

If you require any further information regarding this research project or your participation in the study you may contact me at [REDACTED] or via e-mail at [REDACTED] or my supervisor, Dr. Wolfgang Lehmann, at [REDACTED] or via email at [REDACTED]. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant or the conduct of this study, you may contact The Office of Research Ethics (519) 661-3036, or via e-mail at [ethics@uwo.ca](mailto:ethics@uwo.ca).

Participant Initials\_\_\_\_  
Version 02/24/2015

**13. Publication**

If the results of the study are published, your name will not be used. If you would like to receive a copy of any potential study results, please provide your name and contact number on a piece of paper separate from the Consent Form.

*This letter is yours to keep for future reference.*

Thank you for your cooperation and consideration.

Elizabeth Torrens  
Ph.D. Candidate  
Department of Sociology  
Western University  
London, ON N6A 5C2

Participant Initials\_\_\_\_  
Version 02/24/2015

**Project Title: Gender and Sexuality-Based Bullying: Student Educational Resiliency and Teacher and Administrator Intervention Experiences**

**INTERVIEW CONSENT FORM**

Principal Investigator: Wolfgang Lehmann  
Associate Professor  
Department of Sociology  
Western University  
London, ON N6A 5C2

Co-investigator: Elizabeth Torrens  
Ph.D. Candidate  
Department of Sociology  
Western University  
London, ON N6A 5C2

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Interviewee Name (please print)

I have read the Letter of Information, have had the nature of the study explained to me and I agree to participate. All questions have been answered to my satisfaction.

I understand that this interview will be audio-recorded, but I have the right to stop the interview at any time and end my participation in this study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Interviewee Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Person Obtaining Informed Consent (please print)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Person Obtaining Informed Consent

Participant Initials\_\_\_\_  
Version 02/24/2015

## **Figure 7: Appendix G - Interview Guides**

### **Proposed Study Title: Gender and Sexuality-Based Bullying: Student Educational Resiliency and Teacher and Administrator Intervention Experiences**

#### **Interview Guidelines - Students**

This is a semi-structured interview with a few questions for outline purposes. The interview guide will be used as a check list for each question. The probes will be formed based on participants' responses.

#### Open statements

Interviews will start with the personal introduction of the research support staff and with brief information about the study. Then, letter of information and consent form will be provided to the participants. They will be reminded that there is no best answer for the interview questions. This study is interested in their experiences from their own point of view.

#### Questions

*The first few questions are just some introductory questions so that you can tell me a little bit more about yourself and why you wanted to participate in the study.*

- How has the college/university experience been for you so far?

Did you always want to attend a post-secondary institution?

What made you want to attend college/university?

What do you want to do after you complete your program?

Why?

- How did you hear about this study?

Why did you want to participate?

*Now I would like to ask you about some of your earlier school experiences.*

- Could you tell me a little bit about your experiences in school regarding gender or sexuality-based bullying?

What experiences stand out in your memory the most?

When do you think this first started?

Why do you think you were targeted?

How did this affect your school experience?

Grades, Absenteeism, Peer interactions, Feelings towards teachers or school staff

Did you define those experiences as bullying?

Why or why not?

- How did you deal with those experiences?

What do you think helped you?

What do you think would have helped?

What do you think would be the most important resource that helped you?

- Did your experiences change over time?

Why do you think this happened?

Did you change how you dealt with your experiences?

Did certain resources become more important or less important?



*Now I would like to ask you about the role of teachers and school administrators, for example, principals, in dealing with instances of gender or sexuality-based bullying.*

- How did teachers play a role in your experiences?

Did teachers do anything that was particularly helpful?

What else could they have done?

Why do you think they might not have done that or intervened?

- How did principals or other school staff play a role in your experiences?

Did these individuals do anything that was particularly helpful?

What else could they have done?

Why do you think they might not have done that or intervened?

- Were there particular programs in school, that you can remember, that targeted this form of bullying or harassment?

How do you feel about these programs?

How could they be improved?

*Now I would like to ask you some questions about what changes might be helpful, based on your own experiences.*

- How do you think that schools could better deal with instances of gender or sexuality-based bullying?

Why do you think this would be effective?

Who do you think has the greatest responsibility for dealing with instances of gender or sexuality-based bullying?

Why?

*The final set of questions that I would like to ask you are based on the role that your experiences with bullying have played in shaping who you are now.*

- Do you think experiencing this form of bullying has shaped who you are or how you see yourself?

Do you think they have shaped your educational path?

- Have your experiences changed now that you are attending post-secondary school?

How?

Why do you think this happened?

Do you feel that the same things that might have helped you deal with the bullying in the past are the same resources that you might use now?

Are there different ways that you deal with such bullying now?

- Do you feel that you were able to overcome the negative experiences associated with bullying?

Can you describe any positive effects that have resulted from your experiences with this form of bullying?

- Is there anything else that you would like to add before we conclude the interview?

Thank you for your time.

## **Interview Guidelines – Teachers and School Administrators**

This is a semi-structured interview with a few questions for outline purposes. The interview guide will be used as a check list for each question. The probes will be formed based on participants' responses.

### Open statements

Interviews will start with the personal introduction of the research support staff and with brief information about the study. Then, letter of information and consent form will be provided to the participants. They will be reminded that there is no best answer for the interview questions. This study is interested in their experiences from their own point of view.

### Questions

*The first few questions are just some introductory questions so that you can tell me a little bit more about yourself and your role within schools.*

- Can you tell me about your current job?

What grade level(s) are you currently responsible for teaching or supervising?

How long have you been in this job?

Have you always taught/supervised children around grade \_\_\_\_ (fill in with respondent's earlier answer)

How do you like it?

Did you always want to be a teacher/principal (based on participant's earlier response)?

*I would now like to ask you a few questions about your experiences in witnessing gender or sexuality-based harassment in schools.*

- What does gender and sexuality-based bullying mean to you?

- Based on your experience, what does gender and sexuality-based bullying look like?

Who do you feel is most likely to be targeted?

Who do you feel is most likely to perpetrate such forms of bullying?

Why do you think this is?

How frequently do you witness this type of bullying?

How prevalent do you think such forms of bullying are in your school?

Do you think that this has changed over time?

How so?

Why do you think this is?

- What do you think students who face such forms of bullying need to do in order to overcome, or move past such experiences?

What resources do you think are most important for these students to mitigate any negative outcomes of being bullied?

Why?

How are they useful?

During your time as an educator, have you ever been the target of gender or sexuality-based harassment specifically?

Could you tell me more about this?

Do you think this has had an impact on how you deal with the issue among students?

*Now I would like to ask you a few questions regarding your experiences in dealing with such instances of bullying.*

- Do you feel prepared to deal with instances of gendered or sexuality specific forms of bullying in the classroom?

Why or why not?

- What do you feel is your most common response to situations involving gendered or sexuality specific forms of bullying?

Why do you respond this way?

What is your interaction with the bully, or bullies like?

What is your interaction with the victim, or victims like?

What is your interaction with any other students who might be nearby or involved?

Do you think your response tends to be effective?

Why, or why not?

- What are some of the obstacles that you face when attempting to deal with instances of gender or sexuality-based bullying?

- Do you think your response to such situations could be improved?

How so?

- Do you feel responsible for intervening in instances of bullying?

Why?

Who else should be involved?

Do such individuals often get involved?

Are there other reasons for bullying that you feel you are more likely to intervene with? (Such as bullying based on race or social class)

*Now I would like to ask you about some of the official policies and programs that deal with gender and sexuality-based bullying or harassment.*

- How familiar do you feel you are with the official Ministry of Education policies?

The policies and procedures set out by your school board?

The policies that your school has set out?

- Do you have experience in conducting or assisting with the implementation of programs that deal with such forms of bullying?

Can you tell me a bit more about these programs?

- Do you feel that enough is being done to deal with this issue?

What improvements could be made?

Can you think of any obstacles that would prevent your improvement from being implemented?

*In some earlier interviews, students who had been bullied were asked about what improvements they thought might have helped them. What do you think about the following suggestions?*

*(Insert suggestions posed by students and collected during student interviews)*

This is the end of our interview. Is there anything more you want to add? Thank you for your time.

## Curriculum Vitae

**Name:** Elizabeth Torrens

**Post-secondary Education and Degrees:** University of Western Ontario  
London, Ontario, Canada  
2007-2011 B.A. (Honours), Specialization in Criminology

The University of Western Ontario  
London, Ontario, Canada  
2011-2012 M.A. Sociology, Program and Policy Specialization

The University of Western Ontario  
London, Ontario, Canada  
2012-2020 Ph.D. Sociology

**Honours and Awards:** (Nominated) Symons Award for Excellence in Teaching  
Trent University  
2019; 2020

Certificate to Recognize Outstanding Teaching Effectiveness  
Instructor, Faculty of Health Sciences  
The University of Western Ontario  
2016

Province of Ontario Graduate Scholarship  
2014-2015; 2015-2016

Certificate to Recognize Outstanding Teaching Effectiveness  
Instructor, Faculty of Health Sciences  
The University of Western Ontario  
2014

Outstanding Graduate Student Award – Masters  
Canadian Sociological Association  
2013

(Nominated) Teaching Assistant of the Year Award  
Society of Graduate Students  
2012; 2013

**Related Work  
Experience**

Lecturer – Full-Time Limited Term Appointment  
Trent University, Department of Sociology  
2017-2020

Instructor  
Sociology of Corrections  
The University of Western Ontario, Department of Sociology  
Winter 2017

Instructor  
Sociology of Corrections  
King's University College at The University of Western Ontario,  
Department of Sociology  
Fall 2016

Teaching Assistant  
King's University College at The University of Western Ontario,  
Department of Sociology  
2013-2017

Lead Teaching Assistant  
Introduction to Sociology  
The University of Western Ontario, Department of Sociology  
2012-2016

Instructor  
Water Polo Kinesiology Activity Course  
The University of Western Ontario, Department of Kinesiology  
2014-2015

Teaching Assistant  
Introduction to Sociology  
The University of Western Ontario, Department of Sociology  
2011-2012

Teaching Assistant  
Sociology of Advertising  
The University of Western Ontario, Department of Sociology  
2011-2012